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A DOUBTING HEART.

BY

ANNIE KEARY,

AUTHOR OF "CASTLE DALY," "OLDBURY," ETC.

NEW EDITION.

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1882.

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1882

THIS book was the work of the last year of its Author's life. It is now given to the public exactly as it passed from her hands, except for a few verbal corrections which were left for others to make. One scene only remained incomplete, and this link was supplied at the Author's request by her friend Mrs. Macquoid, to whom my thanks are due for the care and skill with which she has fulfilled her task of love.

E. K.

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A DOUBTING HEART.

CHAPTER I.

IDLE TEARS.

Tears, idle tears—I know not what they mean.

“WELL, Alma, I really think that at last I have earned a few minutes’ rest.”

The speaker of this sentence was not, as might be supposed, a weary sempstress in an attic, hushing the click of her machine, as it completed the last stitch in her long, long day’s tale of work, or a washerwoman in a cellar wringing the soap-suds from her wrinkled arms, or a governess, whose charges had just been borne off to bed. It was a handsome, matronly lady, in a black velvet dress, who, suiting her action to her words, sank down into a well-cushioned chair by a glowing fire in a London drawing-room. The last visitor had been shown out, the footman had disappeared with the afternoon tea-tray, the doors of the inner drawing-room were shut, and the curtains drawn across; but there was something beyond even these tokens of quiet, that combined to fill the room just then with a subtle atmosphere of repose. There was a suggestion, though one could not precisely say where it lurked, that this delightful stillness succeeded a commotion of some sort. It might be given by an unusually festive arrangement of the furniture of the room, or by occasional sounds of hurrying feet and clacking tongues that came up from the lower regions. Alma read it most plainly in the radiant self-satisfaction that shone in her mother’s face, and seemed to surround her whole person with an aura of congratulation and

conscious well-doing. Only for an instant did her lace cap touch the back of her chair, the next, her head was erect again, and her face turned to her daughter with an alert expression on it, which told Alma that the discussion of yesterday's events, that had been going on since morning, and of which she herself was sick at heart, was about to be opened again in some new phase.

"Do you know, my dear Alma," Lady Rivers began, "I really can't yet take in the thought that only yesterday at three o'clock Constance left us—Constance and her husband. Now the excitement is all over, we shall begin to miss the dear child dreadfully. I wonder I don't feel it more, but of course I shall now that all is over."

"I hope not, mamma."

"But I shall. A mother must feel the loss of her daughter, however satisfactory the cause of the separation may be. Do you know, Alma, I fancied Lady Forest was a little surprised that the leave-taking between myself and Constance passed so quietly. *She* cried when she said 'Good-bye' to her son, I observed, but then she is a widow; I am sure I hope she won't argue, from my self-control, that Constance is not a great loss to me. I hope it won't give a wrong impression about how that lovely creature is regarded in her own home. I really don't know how it happened. I am sure my feelings are keen enough; but yesterday morning was such a whirl, and just as the travellers were starting, Preston came to me with a teasing question about the arrangements for the evening. I was obliged to attend to him, or nothing would have been as it should be."

"Lady Forest is differently circumstanced, you see, mamma; she can afford to have feelings on public occasions, and let things take their course. She is not on promotion as we are."

"I should be very much grieved if I thought Constance was in any danger of being looked down upon by the people she is going among. I have been doing my very utmost ever since I saw how things were likely to turn out, to give the Forests the right impression about all our connections. I have given your father all the hints I could, to prevent his making unfortunate allusions, as he does sometimes, and I have gone against

my own feelings and run the risk of offending old friends, for the sake of keeping all our entertainments lately, as nearly as possible, to their set. My own feelings would have led me to ask Emmie West to be one of the bridesmaids, but I refrained, from fear of giving theirs the smallest shock."

"I wonder what sort of feelings those are that would be shocked at the sight of Emmie West?"

"Lady Forest is very inquisitive, and might have asked questions. As it was, I think she must have been struck with the fact that the person of most consequence in the room was a friend on our side, quite unconnected with them. I wonder whether your father talked at all to Lord Anstice. I rather thought he would have proposed his health, but he did not. Do you suppose Lord Anstice was satisfied with the amount of attention he received, Alma?"

"I did not ask him, mamma; but I don't suppose he came here to talk to papa, or to have his health drunk either."

"Alma, have you any idea that he came for any other reason than because he was asked? You will tell me, I am sure, if you have."

"He did not come for the reason that has just shot into your head, dear mother, I assure you, so put it away as quickly as you can. It was all a joke to him. His cousin, whom we do know intimately, and whom we did not ask, saw the invitation we sent to him whom we knew very little, and ordered him to accept it. My clairvoyance does not go farther than that. I can't make up my mind how much good-nature there was in Wynyard Anstice's bestirring himself to secure us the presence of a live earl at our first wedding, or how far it was done in pure scorn. Lord Anstice did as he was bid, and is only disappointed that we are all so like the people he sees every day, that coming to our wedding has given him nothing new to talk about. If we had been vulgar on the surface, so that he could see it, he would have been quite satisfied with his morning's entertainment."

"Really, Alma, I wonder how you can talk in that cold-blooded way. If Wynyard Anstice has been representing us to his cousin as proper subjects for ridicule, I

can only say he makes a most unworthy return for all the kindness I showed him in old times, when your brothers used to bring him from school to spend holidays with us. I can't believe such a thing of him, however."

"And you need not, mamma. I am quite as sure as you can be, that Mr. Anstice has never spoken disparagingly of us to anyone, and I sincerely believe he meant to do you a pleasure by sending his cousin here yesterday. Perhaps he thought it would please me too; I don't know."

"Then you should not say such misleading things, my dear, making one uncomfortable for nothing."

"You are right, mamma, I should not."

The conversation seemed to have come to a standstill, as it was apt to do when Wynyard Anstice's name got into any talk between the mother and daughter.

Alma, who was much given to tracing effects to their causes, was just beginning to wonder how this name came to be spoken so often—seeing that her own determination, and, as she believed, her mother's, was to keep it from ever being spoken at all: was it really so much in her secret thoughts, that it forced itself to her tongue without her will's leave?—when the thread of her self-questioning was broken by the entrance of the servant with the evening letters. A foreign one, addressed to Alma, fixed her mother's eyes, as well as her own.

"From Constance," exclaimed Lady Rivers, leaning forward in her chair, the self-satisfaction passing from her face as a flash of true mother-hunger came for a moment into her eyes.

"Be quick and open it, Alma; there will be something for me inside. What! not a line—well, read—what does the sweet child say? Is she comfortable and happy?"

"There is not much; you had better read it, mamma; it is chiefly directions about sending on her boxes," said Alma, as she handed a sheet, with a few lines scribbled on it, to her mother.

"And there is nothing more? Alma, are you sure?" said Lady Rivers, after a moment's silence, during which her heart, deadened and choked with world dust as it was, had been rent with a sore pang. "You are sure there is

no slip of paper inside the envelope with a more private word to me or you? This tells us nothing."

"It is all there is; and, mamma, I am very sorry to see that you are so disappointed; but I think Constance is right: it would not do for her to begin writing private words to me, or even to you, now that she is Constance Forest. She cannot have anything really interesting to tell us, so she had much better hold her tongue."

"My dear, I had a great deal to say to *my* mother the day after my wedding."

"You, mamma! Yes."

The tone in which this was said carried so much suggestion with it, that Lady Rivers sat upright in her chair, and folded her hands in her lap preparatory to answering it.

"My dear Alma, I wish you would get out of the habit of insinuating things. I don't think you can mean it, but really your manner of speaking of Constance's engagement ever since it took place, and now of her marriage, would lead anyone who heard you to suppose that it was something forced upon her, instead of being her own deliberate choice, as you well know to have been the case."

"No, mamma, I don't mean to throw any blame of the kind on you; I beg your pardon if I have given that impression. I know that Constance chose her lot herself with her eyes open, and I really think she has taken what will suit her best: but, all the same, I doubt whether her thoughts about it just now will bear discussion with you or me, and I think she is wise to take the silent course, and work it into the best shape she can by herself."

"I can't see why she should not be radiantly happy and thankful to me, who have done so much for her, and by my exertions (for this is the case, Alma) enabled her to gain the position she is best suited for. Sir John Forest may not be as clever as your father or so agreeable as Wynyard Anstice——"

"There is no need to bring his name into the discussion, mamma."

"Certainly not, except that you and your brothers have made so much more of him than he deserves; but, as I was saying, it is an enviable position Constance has

gained, and I do think it is rather hard on me, who have toiled night and day for all your advancement, that when anyone of you succeeds you should grudge me the satisfaction of knowing you are content."

"Dear mother, it is hard, but I think the fruit of the tree we are all of us busy gathering has that kind of taste. Constance has got her apple of Sodom, and it is a very handsome one to look at; we had better not insist on knowing exactly what she finds inside it, I think."

"My dear Alma, at least I hope you will keep such reflections for home use."

"You may depend on that, mamma; and after to-day, on this subject at least, I don't think you will hear any more of them. You must please forgive me if I have made you uncomfortable, but you know, now that I have lost Constance, there is no one else to whom I can safely grumble on home subjects. However, I have done now, mamma. Let us turn to the other letters."

A heap of invitations and notes of congratulation were examined, discussed, and put aside to be answered later, and then Alma held up two thick letters to her mother's notice. "One is from Agatha from her convent, and the other from Aunt West: shall I read them aloud to you?"

Lady Rivers sank back in her chair with a look of real uneasiness and oppression now. "I don't think I can bear either to-night," she said; "they must keep for a few hours. Whatever Agatha has found to say about her sister's marriage, I know it will be something to give me pain; and the last time she wrote she signed herself, 'Sister Mary of Consolation,' as if to show how completely she had cut herself off from her own family. You may not readily believe it of me, Alma, but I could hardly get the thought of Agatha out of my head all yesterday, the bitter thought of her estrangement from me; and you would have me suppose that I have lost Constance, too, in another way."

"I am sorry I said so much, mamma, for I am sure Constance will give you all the satisfaction out of her married life she can; but how about Aunt West's letter?"

"Read it to yourself, and tell me by-and-by if there is anything that needs an answer. It can hardly be a pleasant letter. Of course your poor aunt must feel

aggrieved, for I really have been obliged to neglect the Wests of late, and it is unfortunate that it should have happened so soon after the death of the little boy which she took so much to heart. I am sure I felt for her at the time, but when, soon after, this affair of Constance's came on, I could not help my time and thoughts being greatly taken up. Lately I have not dared even to mention the name of West before your father, for fear he should take it into his head to insist that Emmie and Harry, and perhaps half-a-dozen more of them, should be asked to the wedding. Luckily your father never thinks of things unless they are actually brought before him. Of course I can't exactly explain to your poor aunt how it has been, or tell her I am determined to make up for my seeming neglect by doing all we can for them now."

"If they will let us."

"Ah, yes; Mr. West's temper is a great hindrance to the whole family, and poor Emmeline has always given way far too much to him. I think, even with all their misfortunes, she might with spirit have kept up the credit of the family better. I don't think I should ever have allowed children of mine to live in a house, the best rooms of which were let out to lodgers; *that* degradation, that last fatal step, I think, I should have had resolution to spare my family."

"Even with Mr. West for a husband. Mamma, what was Aunt Emmeline like when she was young—I don't mean as to looks—I can imagine that well enough; but, in short, how did she ever come to marry Mr. West?"

"My dear, things looked very differently then from what they do now. When we two sisters were engaged about the same time, it was I who was thought to be doing the imprudent thing, and, so to speak, rather throwing myself away. Emmeline's match was considered a very good one—the junior partner in an old London mercantile house. I can remember how my mother used to explain it to our visitors, and the touch of mortification I felt at the few words that came to my share. 'Mr. Rivers is considered a clever man,' my mother would say apologetically, 'and though promotion is slow at the Bar, poor Agatha has made up her mind to

take her chance with him.' No one could have foreseen then how affairs would turn out, or the altered position we two sisters should stand in towards each other by the time our children were grown up."

"So poor Aunt Emmeline has not even the satisfaction I always credited her with—of having a disinterested love match to look back upon."

"You do so jump to conclusions, Alma. I never said your aunt did not love Mr. West when she married him. Of course she did, and was flattered by his choice of her, as well as very thankful to give such a triumph to her father and mother, who had not had much prosperity in their early lives, I can tell you. She made them happy in their old age, and I often tell her the reflection should be a greater support to her in her misfortunes than I fear it is. At all events, she has a right to look for a like return from her own daughter."

"Poor little Emmie, I hope you won't impress that obligation too strongly upon her, mamma; she has burdens enough already, and had better let the matrimonial one wait a while. It is all very strange. Now I think of it, I can remember stories of Agatha's and Frank's childhood which always struck me as investing the Wests with quite a different relationship to ourselves from anything that Constance and I ever saw. I have felt dimly, but never realised, that they were the great people in those days, and that some strange jugglery must have taken place to alter the perspective so."

"No one can say, my dear, that prosperity has changed my feelings; it has only laid fresh duties upon me, and of course your poor aunt Emmeline's duties are changed too."

"As far as we are concerned, the life in Saville Street has faded into a dim background, which brings out all the sharp points of our prosperity, with different effects on the minds of the beholders—very different effects."

"You need not remind me of that, Alma; it is never far from my thoughts, and you cannot wonder if I feel very little disposed to throw you younger ones much under Aunt Emmeline's influence. I never can forget that it was after spending a month in Saville Street that Agatha first began to talk to me about her distaste of the world,

and attraction toward sacred poverty, and to put forth the extraordinary views that have landed her where she is now."

"Aunt West is not responsible, however, for the direction Agatha's enthusiasm has taken; she is quite as much puzzled at it as you are; and to set against Agatha's convent, in the scale of obligation between us and the Wests, you must put yesterday's wedding. You may not be aware of it, but it was after an afternoon spent in Saville Street that Constance made up her mind to throw over young Lawrence for all the dances she had promised him at old Lady Forest's ball, and forced herself to give Sir John the smile that settled his destiny for ever afterwards. I saw it all, and shall always maintain that if the atmosphere in the Wests' little breakfast-room that day had been a whit more tolerable, and the boys' manners just a shade more civilised, young Lawrence would have won the day, and been the bridegroom at Constance's wedding yesterday."

"Alma, what reckless talk! how can you allow yourself to indulge in it now?"

"Just this once more, mamma. As I said before, I have no one but you to grumble with, and after to-night I shall have so accustomed myself to the new state of affairs as not to care to talk about it. But I have done already. I am going to read the letters."

The mere outside of these seemed to have effectually quelled Lady Rivers's activity, for she at last leaned back in her chair, and shaded her eyes with her hand, not to see Alma's face as she read the closely-written sheets slowly by the firelight. The flicker rose and fell, bringing out all manner of beautiful lights and shades on her sheeny silk dress, on the coils of soft light hair that lay low on her neck, and on a face, turned towards the flames, that was never hard to read, and that some people thought worthy of a good deal of study. Some people—others were apt to raise the question whether Alma Rivers would have passed for a beauty if the loveliness of her two sisters had not somehow involved her in a halo of admiration and observation that blinded the public eyes to her actual claims. And then would follow a criticism of features which demolished all her pretensions to the regular

beauty they inherited from their mother, by showing how much likeness to her father there was in her spirited face. It was almost ridiculous, people said, to catch under a wreath of flowers and braided hair, a resemblance to those strongly - marked characteristic features which political caricatures and illustrated journals had familiarised everybody with, and had held up again and again to public admiration or contempt. It really did make the homage paid to Alma as a reigning beauty almost absurd. But the homage continued to be paid through a second season when Lady Rivers's energetic management had taken her daughters *everywhere*; and there was one at least of her admirers willing to allow that it was just those irregularities of form and flashes of expression to which other people objected, that gave her face its conquering charm, and made it the one beautiful face in the world for him.

Alma let the letters fall into her lap when she had read them, and sat with her hands clasped round her knees, looking into the fire, for a long time. There was perfect stillness at last, and the room was full of the scents of hothouse flowers, and of a ruddy fire-glow in which it was luxury to sit and dream, and there was, it must be confessed, a kind of luxury of sadness in the reverie to which Alma gave way. A sadness which was very far indeed from being pain, though, as the thought rose, large round tears gathered in Alma's beautiful eyes, and made marks on the sheeny dress as they fell. She fancied herself very unhappy, for she had no experience which taught her the great gulf that lies between imaginative sorrows which can estimate the pathos of their own pain, and those vital ones which strike at the very root of thought; and she believed herself just now to have come to a point in her life when a great many cherished illusions must be parted with, and a reality she was not prepared for embraced. Henceforth, she was saying to herself, there would be much of solitude in her life, and if any important decision had to be made she must make it alone; and, what was worse, without any clear principles or even definite wishes to shape her determination upon. She had, she told herself, grown out of many splendid hopes of her youth, and the failure

consisted rather in that she was disenchanted with herself than with her old ideals. The objects she had longed for might even be near, ready for her to take; but she doubted very much her own strength to choose them now, or rather to be satisfied with them when chosen. Was it strength or weakness, reasonableness or folly? she asked herself with a touch of self-contempt, which made her see the desirableness of opposite goods so strongly that she could not heartily wish for anything; or was she really at twenty so dusty and dried up with the worldliness she had imbibed from her childhood as to have no power of *feeling* vividly, only this horrible power of *thinking*, of weighing everything in the balance, and finding it wanting? Why had Agatha deserted her? Agatha, through whose imagination she had been used to look at the world, who had invested the amusements and pursuits they had shared together with something that made them worth living for. Why had Agatha, suddenly at the end of one month of absence, come back translated as it were into a new world, the entrance-gate to which was for ever shut to Alma? Why had she deliberately stripped off the halo, she had herself given, from all their aims and pleasures, pronouncing them hollow and unsatisfying, and then stepped out into a sphere whose pure, cold, dazzling air Alma felt she could not breathe? Her hand strayed once during these thoughts to Agatha's letter lying on her lap, but she did not take it up. It was no use. It was too far off from her to be any help. The inward spiritual experiences it treated of were, for her, too unreal to have any comfort in them. Tears of real pain, but of the pathetic bearable sort still, came to her eyes as she murmured to herself:

"For this alone on Death I wreak
The wrath that garners in my heart;
He put our lives so far apart,
We cannot hear each other speak."

Was the misfortune less when something else than death did this? when the body was left and the audible voice, and it was the soul that had gone too far off for thought to pass between it and those it had left? What silence was there so terrible as the silence that comes between souls that can no longer make each other under-

stand, however loud they speak, or however closely and lovingly they whisper in the ear? For ever, Alma said to herself, must this silence reign between herself and her best-loved sister; and now Constance, her nursery companion, who had clung to her trembling a few hours ago, had been borne off—rather by the course of events, it seemed, than her own free will—into this unknown world of matrimony, to which certainly love had not given her a golden key. How would she fare in it? Was hers the substantial real world, and Agatha's only shadow; or was it just the other way? Was there a real world possible for those who, having tasted of the Sodom apples, had lost the power of distinguishing substance from shadow? Alma smiled with a little scorn of her self-scorn, as she asked the question, and then proceeded to justify it by a rapid survey of the lives she knew best—even Aunt West's, robbed of the spice of romance she had credited it with, beginning under false expectations, and ending in gloom—her mother's, which to outsiders looked such a brilliant example of rewarded love, but from which, as she knew, love had long since been crowded out by hosts of uneasy cares and paltry ambitions. After all, since this same dust of care choked all roads alike, did it matter much by which gate one entered on one's destiny, love or worldly prudence? Had not Constance after all done well in ignoring the gate, and choosing what appeared the least uphill road, strewn with fewest stones to hurt her feet?

Alma thought she was relays pondering this problem in the abstract, and trying to give it a dispassionate answer; and, all the time, it was not Constance's decision she was looking at. Her thoughts, like birds on the wing, were hovering, but never settling, round an application of the question that concerned herself. There it was in the distance, a very uphill road, but the gate looked golden enough. She was not nearly ready for a decision yet. She might never be ready, she told herself, but meanwhile there was at least interest in glancing furtively that way sometimes. If she could but see how the road would look a little farther on. If the hand that offered the key would remove some stones out of the way she was required to walk in; if he would even leave off putting down fresh

stones ; or if—if—looking down into her soul she could find strength to choose the stony path, and find the same strange satisfaction in it that he seemed to find. Well—well—Constance's marriage, and yesterday's display, and the invitation sent to Lord Anstice that was due to his cousin, were threads of circumstance certainly not drawing her *that way*. She saw how they were being woven about her, and wondered whether she, like Constance, would wake up some day to find herself bound to a course she only half approved by a million slender invisible threads that could only be broken by the strength of a Hercules.

Alma had ample time for all these speculations, for this was one of the evenings when her father was not likely to return home till very late ; and under pretext of fatigue she and her mother had decided on keeping on their afternoon dresses, and indulging in a second tea in the inner drawing-room, instead of dinner.

Lady Rivers dearly loved this indulgence, but sternly refused it to herself, except on rare occasions, for fear her servants should guess that its enjoyment consisted in its being a renewal of old habits. When, an hour later, she and Alma were sitting together, with a comfortable meal spread on a small table by the fire, and a knock came at the front door, her face showed an extremity of dismay at which Alma could not help smiling.

"Will Preston be so absurd as to let anyone in?" she cried. "What o'clock is it, Alma? Only a quarter-past eight! We could not be supposed to be taking tea after dinner, and with *pâtés* and jelly on the table, at this hour."

"Only a very charitable person would give us the benefit of such a supposition, I am afraid, mamma. But don't be alarmed. I assure you I have seen Lady Forest sit down to tea on Sunday evening with a plate of radishes before her ; and if our visitor at this untimely hour proves to be one of her set, I will take an opportunity of mentioning the circumstance."

"Pray don't be so absurd. Stay! It was not your father's knock ; but surely that is his footstep on the stairs! What a comfort that it is only your father!"

But Lady Rivers rejoiced too soon. It was indeed the face of Lord Justice Rivers that appeared when the door

opened; but other steps followed his to the inner room; and before she had finished her exclamations of surprise at her husband's unexpected return, Wynyard Anstice had shaken hands with Alma, and was making his way towards her, with a look on his face half deprecatory, half mischievously-triumphant, such as he used to confront her with in long past days, when he had been deputed by the school-room party to confess some desperate piece of mischief, in which all the juniors had been involved with him.

"I am perfectly aware I am doing what you don't like in coming here this evening," the look said; "but I don't mean you to be angry with me. I am throwing myself on the good-natured side of your character, in whose existence I always mean to believe, however much your actions towards me belie it."

She had never been able to resist feeling a sort of motherliness towards him, which his boyish confidence in her had called out in old times; and even now, vexed as she was, his winning face and manner conquered her again; and she shook hands and answered his inquiries after the newly-made Lady Forest with less coldness than had lately marked her attitude towards this least desirable of all Alma's lovers. She did not even attempt to telegraph her vexation on to her husband; there was no use in directing displeased glances towards Sir Francis Rivers, for he never saw them. If he had ever listened to her hints about the undesirableness of encouraging Wynyard Anstice's intimacy with the family, he had utterly forgotten by this time that such words had ever been spoken; and now he sat down with a provoking smile of complacency on his face, satisfied that he had done a sensible thing in bringing home an old family friend, on a vacant evening, and thus securing pleasant occupation for the ladies of the house, while he was set free to enjoy the rare luxury of lounging in his easy-chair with an uncut quarterly which he had already taken from a side table in passing, and was nursing lovingly on his knee.

"Ah," he said, glancing towards the table by the fire, and then at his wife, "I need not have dined at the club if I had known I should be released so early; we would

have had high tea together, my dear, in memory of old days, and I might almost have fancied ourselves back in our chambers at Gate Street, when the children were babies, and dinners were luxuries reserved for high days."

Lady Rivers kept her face steadily turned towards the cup she was filling during this speech, and only Alma saw the beautiful look that shone from Wynyard Anstice's eyes towards her father. It stirred her with a vivid feeling that had pleasure, and a little pain in it too. She liked to see her father appreciated, above most things, but she was not sure that she wanted Wynyard Anstice to admire him exactly for the reason in his thoughts now. Encouragement in being unconventional and unworldly was precisely what Wynyard Anstice did not, in Alma's estimation, require. She might like these qualities in him ever so dearly far down in her inmost heart, but she saw, at the same time, that they would not aid him in paving the smooth path she sometimes dreamed they might walk in together. The next moments brought her unmixed pleasure, for, while her father sipped his tea, keeping his finger on the page in the quarterly he was longing to plunge into, he carried on a desultory conversation with his guest, from which it appeared that a recent article of Mr. Anstice's had attracted her father's attention, and won his unqualified approbation as being a masterly piece of reasoning, for once unspoiled by reference to any particular crotchets. Alma even thought she observed a new air of respect in her father's manner, very different from the amused indulgence with which he had hitherto been in the habit of listening to young Anstice's arguments, when by-and-by a lively discussion grew out of this qualified praise. As she listened, turning her head from one speaker to the other, and now and then venturing to put in a playful word, a change seemed to come over her whole person; the cynical, weary look left her face; her brow cleared of its weight of discontent; her eyes took a new intensity of colour in their blue depths; the drooping mouth became full of spirit and tenderness. It was the look that was her father's, but with something higher added—a touch of enthusiasm that his face had lost. It was her highest

self uppermost for the moment that looked out and showed to some eyes that noted it well, what a stake it was for which the world and love were playing.

Meanwhile Lady Rivers was asking herself: "Could anything be more unfortunate?" Here was all her laborious twelve months' work in the way of being undone, by her husband, too! who professed—and, to do him justice, honestly intended—to leave the management of family politics in her hands. How it was that, with the reputation for wisdom the world gave him, he should show himself so thoroughly incompetent whenever he presumed to meddle in home affairs, was a standing puzzle to her, and constantly made her feel thankful that public business required so much less delicate handling than private that her husband's blundering could there pass for discretion. If the Government and the Bar had had the same opinion of the Justice's ability that long experience had brought to his wife, where would the prosperity of the family have been? It was indeed well that the coarser texture of men's business was suited to their coarser wits. This reflection soothed the extremity of Lady Rivers's irritation, and enabled her to see that her own consummate prudence would be best shown to-night by standing aside, and letting the unfavourable current that had set in run its course. So when the happy moment came for the Justice, when, without rudeness, he could turn to his book, she established herself in a shady corner of the sofa, which always meant sleep, and saw Alma go to the piano, far away in the arctic regions of the great drawing-room, without a word of objection. Open love-making she knew she had not to fear, and other words, however deep an impression they might make on two hearts, might easily hereafter be explained away. It was, after all, only a desultory conversation that set in, in intervals between Alma's playing; a few sentences merged into the music, and then taken up again. Alma was not in the mood to begin upon one of the half-bantering, half-serious arguments which, for the last year or two, since she was quite grown up, had been the style of discourse she had usually fallen into with her old playmate, and she was afraid of getting any nearer to what Mr. Carlyle would call "sincere speech."

It was not till after quite half an hour's music that she ventured on a remark bearing in any way on what she was thinking about. She had just brought Schumann's "Schlummerlied" to an end, and with her fingers resting on the keys, ready to dash into a waltz, if necessary, she said:

"I am glad you had the sense not to congratulate me when you came in to-day."

"I am a great deal too unhappy myself at another defection from our schoolroom party of long ago to think of such a thing. There will be no one of us left soon."

"Except myself. 'A scolding woman in a wide house.'"

"A queen who has driven all her subjects away, satisfied with the wide house," Anstice corrected, venturing a steady look into Alma's face, that was turned up to him with a half-mocking, half-defiant expression on it.

"You think I have hectored my sisters out of the house, and the poor boys too; what an opinion you must have of my temper to be sure."

"You know that was not what I was thinking."

"Well, but don't you want to know how we all looked and behaved yesterday?"

"Unexceptionably, I am sure; and, as for looks, I suppose none of you can have looked at the bride without thinking how strongly her likeness to your other sister came out under her white veil."

"How do you know? Your cousin could not have told you that."

"My own eyes did. You don't believe I should lose such an opportunity for a critical look at you all, do you? I was up in the gallery all the time watching and comparing."

"Comparing?"

"Yes, I may as well tell you at once what I called this evening principally to find an opportunity of saying to you. A fortnight ago I was in Paris, staying with a friend whose wife has lately become an ardent Roman Catholic. She was full of a grand ceremony that was to take place at a convent near. I went with her, and through a phalanx of gratings, had a glimpse of your

sister Agatha, in what I suppose was her last public appearance. I could not make out the ceremony. It seemed to me a sort of travesty of a wedding followed by a funeral, 'crowned and buried.' And your sister looked so like herself all the while that I had to rub my eyes every now and then to be convinced I was not dreaming one of our old charade-actings over again."

"Do you think she saw you?"

"Oh no; I was cooped up in a crowd behind close gratings. I don't suppose I had any right to be there; but my friend's wife had my edification strongly at heart, and stretched a point. I am afraid she is founding very false hopes on the interest she saw that the ceremony excited in me."

"Tell me again how Agatha looked—was it really as Constance looked yesterday?"

"I never thought them as much alike as other people did, you know; but yesterday, when I had a moment's good view of your sister Constance, as she turned to you just before kneeling down, I could almost have thought myself in that convent chapel again, and that the face was Agatha's—almost, for an instant; the second impression, of course, was of the difference."

"Tell me about that."

"It is difficult to put into words."

"You must try, or you should not have begun to speak about it."

"Well, if I must, let me see. I think I can only say it was a difference in degree, something added to the Convent Bride's look. The fear on Constance's face was awe on Agatha's, and the clinging dependence which made yesterday's bride cast so many reluctant looks back on you, gave Agatha's eyes an inward expression, as if she were gathering strength from some felt but unseen presence. I don't know which was the most beautiful after all; but Agatha's face was the thing to remember."

"And we were none of us there. I wonder if we should any of us have so much as seen all *that* if we had been there."

So far apart we cannot hear each other speak.

The words rushed into Alma's mind again, and with

them came quick tears, that having once been indulged refused to be sent back to their source unshed. She turned her head as far from the light as possible, but could not conceal that in an instant her face was wet.

Lady Rivers would have been ready to faint with dismay, if she had roused herself at that moment from pleasant dreams to such a sight—Alma weeping silently, and Wynyard Anstice looking on with an intensity of sympathy and emotion on his always expressive face, that might well make her thankful for the blinding effect of tears on Alma. The danger to her was only momentary however. Mr. Anstice got up hastily and walked to a distant table, where, with his back to Alma, he stood nervously fingering the ornaments, and clasping and unclasping photograph-books. It had been a great shock to him, and he had as much need of a struggle to get back into his ordinary drawing-room self as had Alma. He had never seen tears in her eyes in his life before, never. Not even in her childhood, when at partings, or meetings, or pathetic readings, which had moved her sisters to tears, she had always remained bright and defiant.

The times when in confidential talk her eyes had softened in his sight were epochs to be chronicled for the effect they had had far down in his inmost soul. He heard a large tear fall on one of the music-sheets she was gathering up in her hands, as his thoughts reached this point, and it sent a thrill through him. A thrill that was not all sympathy with her pain, there was a pang for himself as well as for her. When he had entered the room to-night he believed that a contest which had long disturbed his life was decided for ever, a victory won, and that he had only come to look once more on a lost love. What was there in this sudden rain of tears for Agatha to water the dead hopes, the buried unrest (which he had so congratulated himself on having securely buried) and cause them to spring up into life again stronger and greener than ever? Nothing absolutely. It was most unreasonable to feel that, by revealing so much of her soul to him, Alma had laid a new claim on his devotion; but he did somehow so feel, and he could not all in a moment decide whether it was in pain or triumph that he took up the old burden again, resolving to carry it at all events a little farther on the

road. He only knew that each tear, as it fell, had struck on his heart and left a trace there that would not be easily worn out; whether it was destined to fester into one of those sore spots that make memory a torment, or deepen and widen into a fountain of life-long joy. Alma was innocent of the smallest design or wish to excite so much emotion. She was deeply ashamed of her tears long before the power to restrain them came, and by the time she had strangled the last sob and brought her eyes into something like order, the feeling that had called them forth had evaporated into an absorbing anxiety to look as usual when the now fast-approaching inevitable moment came, when Lady Rivers should awake from her nap and come into the room to end this perilous interview with such words of polite dismissal as she so well knew how to administer to an unwelcome guest.

Alma's first sentence, when she came up to the table and addressed Mr. Anstice, was spoken in a light, indifferent tone that jarred strangely on his mood.

"You won't find any record of yesterday there," she began. "We were not guilty of having ourselves photographed in our wedding dresses. You had better question me unless you have heard all the gossip from your cousin already. I know you are quite capable of cross-examining him on the minutest details, for you always were the news-monger of our society."

He was silent, not being able at once to get back into a lightness of tone that would match hers; and Alma rattled on, throwing an accent of warning into her next sentence.

"Mamma, would you believe it? Mr. Anstice will not allow that he took enough interest in us to ask his cousin how our wedding went off yesterday. Is such total lack of curiosity credible in him?"

Lady Rivers, who had entered the outer room just as Alma left the piano, now came forward into the circle of lamplight with an expression of some anxiety on her face. Had maternal vigilance slept too long and given time for the occurrence of a frightful calamity? A glimpse at Alma's tear-stained face made her heart absolutely stand still, but turning to Wynyard she saw a look of pain on his that sent up her spirits many degrees at once. Was it even

better than she had dared to hope? Had he spoken again, poor fellow? and had Alma, like a sensible, good girl, given him his final dismissal? That would indeed be fortunate, and leave the way clear and open for delicate schemes which her genius, now that Alma was the only one left to scheme for, was longing to elaborate. This pleasing supposition lent quite a motherly tone of interest to her voice and smile, as she turned to the young man, who had once long ago, in the character of her favourite son's safest comrade, shared her matronly solicitude to a certain small extent.

"We know Mr. Anstice's friendly feeling towards the family too well," she said, "not to be sure that nothing but a really pressing engagement would have prevented his being with us, or, at all events, full of thought for us on such an important day."

"I had no engagement. I did not come to you yesterday because I was not asked," he said, looking full at her. Lady Rivers did not expect such a bold thrust even from Wynyard Anstice's unconventional sincerity, but she was equal to the occasion.

"We hardly thought a formal invitation necessary with you, as our note to your cousin warned you of the day; but, however, you did not lose anything by not coming. We were all too sad to be pleasant company, and even Sir Francis broke down in his speech. Your cousin will have told you."

"I have not seen him since yesterday morning."

"He was very undutiful then," cried Alma, whose cheek had burned under her mother's implied falsehood, and who was longing to put an end to the conversation. "He told me he meant to report himself to you on the first moment of his release, and seemed perfectly aware that his *raison d'être* was to see everything with your eyes and carry it to you."

Mr. Anstice smiled. "I know you have a theory of your own about my cousin's character; but now you know him better, don't you see more in him than the sort of devoted SMIKE you chose to fancy him in old days?"

"SMIKE! Oh no. I never thought of anything so racy. My types for you and your cousin were taken from a tale of Madame de Genlis's we used to read in the school-

room—"Alphonse and Thélismar"—the *dérégulé* young French noble and his philosophical friend, who brought him back to reason by discourses on nature and the general course of things."

"I hope yesterday made you ashamed of the inexactness of your portrait-painting then."

"Well, I will confess I was a little disappointed. Lord Anstice did not talk so much like Alphonse as I had expected, nor display so much devotion to Thélismar as" (lowering her tone) "I perhaps think past and present circumstances warrant."

"I have always told you you misunderstand those same circumstances."

Lady Rivers did not hear the lowered tones, but she had caught the word "disappointed," and could not resist putting in a word on a subject which was always more or less in her thoughts whenever she saw Alma and Wynyard Anstice together.

"You must not be surprised if we all feel a little disappointed on first acquaintance with your cousin. We naturally expect a great deal from a person in whose favour, as it seems to us, you voluntarily cut yourself off from all your prospects in life, and from your older friends."

It was meant for a stinging reproach to Wynyard, but all the pain it gave came to Alma. To him it was almost incomprehensible, so distorted was the view of the facts to which it alluded.

Some years ago, when the Riverses first knew him, he and his younger cousin had been equally dependent for education and advancement in life on the head of their family, a bachelor uncle, with an old title and large unentailed estates. The younger and the least promising lad represented the elder branch and was heir to the title; but Wynyard had always been his uncle's favourite, and was looked upon as likely to inherit the larger portion of his wealth, till a few months before the old man's death, when he managed to quarrel with him on some abstract questions of principle and conduct, and so offended him by maintaining his own contrary views, on a public occasion, that he was never received into favour again. When a little later the uncle died and

the will came to be read, it was found that the despotic old man had heaped the whole of his great wealth on the nephew who, though less satisfactory in conduct, had allowed his theories to be prescribed for him, and had left the one best loved to fight out a position in the world he had elected to live in, after fashions of his own.

This change in Mr. Anstice's circumstances had occurred about two years ago, just at the time when his attachment to Alma began to be talked about; and Lady Rivers never could forgive the part he had acted in ruining himself. If a totally unattached young man of her acquaintance chose to be quixotic, and recklessly throw away the good gifts fortune had designed for him, a quiet pity for his folly, and a resolute avoidance of him in future, was all the notice that it was necessary for her to take of his misconduct. But when the young man had already taken the liking of a girl of good position into his keeping, and when that girl was her own most attractive daughter, the indignation that swelled her motherly heart was too bitter to be quietly borne. It was always waking up and rousing her into expressions of hostility that her better judgment deprecated—the more so as Alma could never be made to express satisfactory condemnation of her lover's conduct. Yet the invectives were not altogether lost. Alma did not acquiesce when her mother told her again and again that Wynyard Anstice's real care to win her was to be estimated by the lightness with which he had thrown away the conditions that made such winning possible; but the words rankled and made a sore wound in her mind that winced whenever it was touched. The pain she felt just now stung her into something like defiance, and determined her to persevere in the low-toned talk it was meant to interrupt.

"I am really sorry you did not see your cousin yesterday afternoon," she said; "I had given him a message for you, and he promised me to look you up, in whichever of your haunts you might be."

"The haunt which actually held me was one where I don't think his courage would have been sufficient to induce him to follow me. At the time when your party broke up, I was speaking in a lecture-room in an out-of-the-way place in the East-end, at a meeting

convened to discuss woman's suffrage, among other social questions."

Alma's face clouded again; every fresh instance of Mr. Anstice's disposition to take up unpopular subjects struck her as a sort of slight to herself.

"How can you go to such places? making people talk of you, and hindering your getting on in your profession, and lowering papa's opinion of your good sense. Why can't you give up such freaks now?" she asked, putting a greater amount of pleading in her voice than she was quite aware of.

"I did not intend to take part in the discussion when I went in; I was moved to it by what I thought unfair hostility shown towards a lady, who got up in the body of the meeting and pleaded woman's rights, not so much to votes as to wider spheres of work, in a speech that was a good deal above the heads of most of the people there. I will confess, however, that I was struck with her remarks before the row began, and with herself too, for she was no common-looking person, I can tell you, in spite of the company she had got herself among. Perhaps some people—I don't say myself, but some people—might even have thought it worth while to miss a wedding-breakfast for the sake of hearing and seeing her."

"Then I suppose she is young and handsome, in spite of *Punch's* last week's picture. But she must be a monster to go to a meeting of rough people, and get up and speak. I can't think how you can defend such conduct."

"I don't defend it; I only say that, being present, I was struck with what she said, and how she looked while saying it."

"So handsome?"

"No, not at all handsome; but a very unforgettable face all the same."

"Did you make out her name?"

"I heard it spoken by some people near—Miss Moore—Katherine Moore, I believe they called her; and as you seem curious about her looks, here is an outline sketch I took of her, before I grew too much interested in what she was saying to do anything but listen."

"Katherine Moore——"

Alma repeated the name musingly, as she examined a pocket-book page, on which was sketched hastily, but effectively, a strongly-featured expressive face, with dark level brows, wide forehead, full well-shaped mouth, and indented chin.

"Katherine Moore—how strange. I believe she must be the elder of the two sisters to whom Aunt West——"

Alma stopped short, arrested by an agonised look from her mother; and Lady Rivers finished her sentence—"One of the orphans whom my sister, Mrs. West, has received into her house as companions to her daughter."

"Poor little Emmie West," said Alma quickly, to stop further explanation, "how will she like companions who get themselves into rows at public meetings, I wonder? I must go and look her up, I think, now that all our gaieties are over."

"Miss West," cried Anstice. "Ah! she was not at the wedding any more than myself then? Why should not I look her up, that we may condole with each other, and then perhaps" (with a malicious smile towards Alma) "I shall see my lady orator again."

Mr. Anstice took his departure soon after this, and Alma got a lecture from her mother for making her eyes red, for showing too much interest in Wynyard Anstice's doings, and for bringing in her aunt's name in conversation with people who did not belong to the family. How strange it was that she who was reputed so clever should make more mistakes than Constance ever did, and never allow her mother the repose of feeling she might be trusted!

It certainly had not been a pleasant evening; and yet Alma, as she sat staring into her bedroom-fire before going to bed, felt not happier, perhaps, but fuller of life than she had felt for many long days. The hurry of engagements and gaieties in which she lived had lately been growing so meaningless and vapid to her, it was a comfort to be raised out of its dust, even by sensations of pain—pain of such sort at least as this evening's reflections and the sight of Wynyard Anstice had brought with it. It was not a new pain, nor even a newlight upon it, only the old puzzle that she had pondered again and again. Could he really love her, so very much as his eyes some-

times said, when his own hand had put away the right to ask for her, and when even now he was putting all manner of crotchets before the purpose of climbing quickly up again to such a height as would enable her to look upon him with favour once more. If Alma had been asked if she could appreciate the sentiment of the poet-soldier, who sang :

I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not honour more,

she would have answered : "Yes, certainly ;" but then surely *that* meant honour such as the world could recognise—honour that could be reflected back in a halo round the beloved head ; not subtle scruples like these, self-sacrifices that nobody asked—delicate weighings of more or less worth in work for the world, such as the world would never understand, and that were due to some overstrained unrecognised sense of duty to powers out of sight.

Surely such mere floating thought-motes as these ought to be blown away by the strong gusts of passion ? What was the worth of a love that barriers unseen by most eyes could hold back ? Sadly, after long musing, Alma gave the old answer to this question, and then she knelt down and went through her prescribed round of evening devotions, not recognising that the decision she had just come to was a distinct denial of there being any unseen Presences to pray to.

CHAPTER II.

THE VALLEY OF HUMILIATION.

If we sink low,
If the lost garden we forego
Each in his day, nor ever know
But in our poet souls its face ;
Yet we may rise until we reach
A height untold of in its speech—
A lesson that it could not teach
Learn in this darker dwelling-place.

The clinging damp of a rainy November evening, while it stayed outside well-fenced houses, like Lady Rivers's,

crept uncomfortably through and through the ground-floor rooms of a large scantily-furnished, ill-warmed, and ill-lighted house at the opposite end of London. It brought out a slimy perspiration on the passage walls and hung misty halos round the dim gas-burners, so that they seemed to have withdrawn themselves miles away, and to be acting as signals in a fathomless distance. Perhaps it was the uncomfortable impression of desolate space thus created which made the two occupants of one of the largest of these ground-floor rooms sit close together on an old-fashioned couch ranged against the wall, apparently a mile or two from the fireplace, where a black fire, built up to give out heat some time, but not now, smouldered dully. Quite out of the way of heat and light these two persons had been sitting for at least an hour, and if they were not chilled to the bone, it must have been owing to a certain soft glow of love-light which shone from their eyes whenever in the course of a confidential low-toned talk they had looked at each other. Two pairs of velvety-brown eyes these were which thus interchanged love-light; too exactly alike in shape and colour, and sweep of silken lashes to belong to lovers in the ordinary sense of that word, and having just the contrast of expression, lovingly trustful and lovingly anxious, which might be expected from the actual relationship of their owners. Mother and daughter, the one a thin, worn, sad-looking woman, the other a vigorous, bright girl, whose face, full of delicate colouring and light, spoke of an eager temperament and naturally gay spirits toned just now to seriousness by the quick sympathy that reflected every mood of those she loved.

Something very important had to be decided, something which, so far as the conversation had gone at present, threatened equal pain to her mother, whichever way it was settled; and as Emmie West leaned her soft pink cheek against her mother's worn forehead, her eyes (now that all the arguments she could think of had come to an end) had a sorrowful dumb entreaty in them, which her mother felt without being able to satisfy.

"*Do* make up your mind to choose the least painful course, and *do* be as little unhappy as possible about it," the yearning eyes, hungry for a little joy, said; and sad-

hearted Mrs. West stooped down and kissed them, not having any more satisfactory answer to give to this appeal—an appeal which she was apt to read in her children's eyes many times every day. It was not so much that she had lost the art of making the best of things, but that another influence stronger than even her children's, perpetually forced her to look on the gloomy side.

Life had been hard on Mr. West, on the husband who had in her youth honoured her by thrusting unexpected elevation upon her, and now that the world had turned against him, she felt it would be disloyal in her to see anything but gloom in a state of things in which he had fared so ill. Who had he to feel with him but herself?—not even his children, poor, thoughtless, light-hearted things; and how could his sorrows be adequately mourned, unless her heart were always bleeding? If now and then, on rare occasions, when Mr. West was away, and not likely to return for a longer interval than usual, she was drawn on by her eldest son's gay, good temper, and her daughter's sweet coaxing, to listen to the young people's schemes for the future (in which, to be sure, there was never any mention made of Mr. West), and she let her thoughts take a slight tinge of rose colour from their inexperienced hopefulness, her conscience always smote her afterwards, and she reproached herself, as if her momentary escape from gloom had been an act of unfaithfulness to her husband. Just now, however, there was no question of escape. Mr. West might be expected home any minute, the fire was ready to be broken into a blaze when his foot was heard on the scraper, and she and Emmie were tremblingly discussing the safest way of accomplishing a sacrifice on his behalf which must be so carried out, that, while he profited by it, he should not have the least idea that it had been made for him.

"My dear, I don't think I can make up my mind to-night," Mrs. West was saying. "We had better lock up the box again, and put it back on my dressing-table before your father comes in. I would not have him go upstairs and miss it, and find out what we have been talking about for the world."

"Mamma, I wonder——" Emmie began hesitatingly

—paused—and then hurried on as if half afraid of what she was saying. “Mamma, I wonder whether it might not be better after all to do it openly. Why should you have the pain of parting with your treasures, and the fright as well, which half kills you, of pretending to have got them all the same? Why should not papa know? Perhaps he would leave off expecting so much if he quite understood what a hard struggle it is for you to provide the little luxuries you say are so necessary for him. Let me go on, dear, and say what I have on my mind just this once. I *don't* think it is a fair division for you to have all the giving up, and all the pain of concealment as well. Katherine Moore says that women ought not to do such things; that they should act openly and independently, and then they would not be trampled upon.”

“Trampled upon?” A look of almost wild horror flitted across Mrs. West's face. “Oh, Emmie, my dear, how could she have such a thought about me? You must not get it into your head, darling, or it will make me feel very wicked, as if I had terribly misrepresented things as they stand between your father and me. Trampled upon! Don't you understand, darling, that there is nothing I *don't want* to do for him and all of you? If letting oneself be trampled upon would do any good, and keep humiliation from him and you, there would be no pain in it. It would not degrade me. The pain is that I am such a useless person, and can do so little to serve him and you all.”

“It seems to me that you do everything, and bear all the pain.”

“That is because I talk about it like a woman, and your father is silent to everybody but me; but, oh Emmie, he suffers for us all! I read the bitter pain that cuts down to the very bottom of his soul whenever he is made aware of any fresh privation we have to bear. It hurts him and humbles him down to the ground, though he can only show what he feels by short, sharp words. I understand, if you younger ones don't; and, darling, we will struggle to spare him little mortifications as long as we can; when there is nothing more to be done we will sit still and bear the will of God. Perhaps, when we have done all we can, the worst, if it comes, will bring a sort of peace.”

"Or good fortune will come at last; and, mamma, you must not say that we young ones don't feel for papa. Harry does at all events. I really think he is almost as anxious to keep disagreeable things from papa's sight, and to provide against his being crossed in his fidgets, as you are. Do you know that ever since old Mary Anne refused to clean knives and shoes for lodgers, Harry has got up an hour earlier, and gone downstairs, and done all that part of the work before anyone else is up? This puts Mary Anne into such good humour, that she takes pains with the breakfast again, and sends up the one rasher, and the two bits of toast, and the thick bread-and-butter, with as much ceremony as if it were a Lord Mayor's feast. You have not been downstairs to see lately; but I assure you papa has looked almost satisfied; and yesterday he actually remarked that his boots were well blacked, and supposed we had got a new boy, and Sidney was so tickled at the idea, Harry had to kick him under the table to keep him from exploding. It's all Harry's doing, and I do believe he does it quite as much for papa's sake, as for yours."

"My own boy," said Mrs. West, fervently; and as she spoke her worn face glowed, and a smile broke over it, obliterating for a moment its lines of care and pain, and making it almost as fair and young as Emmie's.

"But you won't love him better than me," said Emmie, pretending to pout; "that would not be a good return for my giving myself up to you body and soul, and seeing only you in the world, would it, mother darling? I agree with Katherine Moore that women can understand and love each other best, and should stick to each other through thick and thin. Let the men fight for themselves, and help themselves, I say. I will take care of you, mother."

"Well then, dearest, I ought not to think of myself as poorer than your poor Aunt Rivers, who seems to be in the way of losing all her daughters, while I am to keep mine."

"And, mamma," cried Emmie, eagerly, "that is another reason for your making up your mind to-day about the necklace. I forgot to mention it before, but it is a reason."

"You're never meaning to leave me, darling?"

"No, but my not having been invited to Constance's wedding. I will confess something to you, mother. I have often thought I should like to wear that necklace just once. I remember how I used to admire it when I was a little child, and you put it on to go out with papa to some grand party, and he used to come out of his dressing-room, when you were ready, and look—you know how, mamma, as he never looks now—proud of you, and of everything about him. I used to think then that wearing a pearl necklace meant being grown up, and beautiful, and perfectly happy. When I heard that Constance Rivers was engaged to be married, it did come into my mind that I might be asked to be one of her bridesmaids, and that perhaps Aunt Rivers would give me a dress such as would not disgrace the necklace, and that, for once, I could have looked so that the Rivers's need not be ashamed of me. But the opportunity has passed, you see. I was not invited to the wedding, and I don't now believe I ever shall be asked to the Rivers's on any grand occasion; they look down upon us too much now. The necklace had better go, and not tantalise us any longer by lying idle in the jewel-box. I should not wonder, if after paying all these bills, and buying what you want for papa, and putting aside a little fund for emergencies, we might get a new floorcloth for the front hall out of the money the sale will bring. It would be a real load off my mind if we could do that, for I am quite certain the old one can't be put down again after another spring cleaning. Imagine our feelings if Aunt Rivers or the new Lady Forest were to call here some day and have to put their feet absolutely on bare boards! I don't think we should ever get Aunt Rivers into the sitting-room, she would faint in the hall; and I am sure no one in this house could carry her back into her carriage. We should never hear the last of it."

"My darling, it was of your own wedding-day, not of Constance Rivers's, that I have thought, when in many a time of sore need I have put back the necklace into its case. Your father gave it me on the day you were christened, and I have a feeling that it is robbing you to send it away. I should have liked him to clasp it round your neck before he gave you away to anyone."

"Mamma," said Emmie, after a moment's pause, with a richer flush than usual on her cheek, but a resolute tone of reasonableness in her voice, "Katherine Moore says it is quite time that girls left off looking upon marriage as the one object of their existence. She says it is an accident of life that occurs now to fewer and fewer women every year, and that girls should plan their lives without any reference to it whatever."

"I am afraid very few of them will do so, my dear, in spite of Katherine Moore."

"But at all events I can, mamma," said Emmie, sitting a little more upright, and pushing her soft brown hair from her forehead, with a decided little gesture that had perhaps been caught from Katherine Moore. "I can make up my mind to look at things as they really are, and face them resolutely without deluding myself with vain expectations. Now let us consider, dear. I hardly ever go anywhere except now and then to drink tea in the 'land of Beulah,' and that counts for nothing, as Mrs. Urquhart only asks me when she is alone. And if by a rare chance I do get an invitation to an evening party, and accept it, I am always sorry afterwards, for I don't feel at home among the other girls when I am there. It can't be helped, mother dear. I have not sat or stood in corners at Aunt Rivers's Christmas parties without finding out exactly how everybody looks at one when one has on the shabbiest dress in the room. Last Christmas a gentleman found me out in my corner, and sat talking to me a long time, and I thought perhaps he found me rather nice till Alma came and explained to me that Mr. Anstice was something of an oddity himself, and always made a point of talking to the person in the company most likely to be overlooked by everybody else. It was ever so nice of him, but it was not the kind of compliment that encourages one to go out again, was it, mamma?"

"My darling, you know I would spare you Aunt Rivers's parties if I could, since I can't dress you for them as I should like; but—but—if Aunt Rivers took offence at my keeping you away, and your father were to begin to suspect her of slighting us——"

"Ah, yes, I know; and besides, dear mamma, I

generally like the thought of the party beforehand well enough ; and Alma is sometimes kind ; or if not, and the reality is worse than I look for, I can always now run up to ' Air Throne ' the next morning, and laugh over my mortifications with the two Moores, till I get not to care for them. I was not complaining, mother dear ; but I want you to face the real state of things ; give up impossible hopes, and sell the necklace. It won't be wanted *ever* for such a day as you fancied ; but we shall have other happy days—great days for the boys perhaps, or even for me, in some other way than marriage. You should hear how the Moores talk. Till these good times come, there is a great deal of pleasure to be got out of the world, even in shabby clothes, and with all our worries and troubles, if you, mother, would only pluck up your courage again. Very nice bits come in between whiles for us young ones. Fun in the back sitting-room of evenings, while you and papa are sitting here dolefully ; and delicious talks with the Moores in ' Air Throne,' and cosy times with dear old Mrs. Urquhart in the ' Land of Beulah.' Does it not sometimes make you dread misfortune a little less when you see that our great crisis—the crisis that you thought would break your heart—of our having to take lodgers into our house, has ended in making us happier ? At least, I know I am a great deal happier since the Moores came ; and Harry and the boys have quite got over the little mortification it was to them at first, in the fun of giving odd names to the new divisions of the house. If Aunt Rivers chooses to be ashamed of us, and to send us to Coventry, we can bear it ; and you won't think us unsympathising, will you, dear, for being able to get a little amusement out of what seemed such a terrible sorrow at first ? ”

Mrs. West thought of the contraction that came on her husband's brow whenever, in the course of their long, silent evenings, the sound of a bell from the upper story reminded him that he was no longer sole master of the house in which he had been born, but she could not quench the light in Emmie's beautiful eyes by such an allusion.

“ Whatever makes you happy is good for me,” she said, gently stroking her daughter's hair back into its usual becoming waves over her forehead, and thus

obliterating the little attempt to look like Katherine Moore that had its terrors for her, though she said nothing about it. "I am sure I hope the Moores' coming will prove good for us all. As your cousins keep so much out of the way, I like you to have other companions."

"Friends," corrected Emmie, eagerly; "friends who will do more for us than all the Riverses put together ever would. Mamma, if you do not mind my telling Katherine about the necklace, I believe her advice will be very useful. She gives lessons on two evenings in the week to a young man who is a working jeweller, and I dare say he could tell us what the necklace is really worth, or even manage the sale for us, if you liked to trust him. I know you don't wish Harry to have anything to do with it."

"My dear, I hope the young man does not come here. What would your father say if he met him, and heard that one of the young lady lodgers gave him lessons? He would think it a monstrous thing! He would want us to turn the Moores out of the house at once. I had no idea myself that Katherine gave lessons to young men—and shopmen too."

"Dear mamma, she thinks nothing of it. You must not judge the Moores as you would anybody else. They are to be judged in quite a different way; and no one but Katherine can explain it. However, you need not be at all uneasy. She never brings any of her pupils up to 'Air Throne'—that is, Christabel's shrine—to draw and write and paint in. Katherine would not desecrate it, she says, by bringing drudgery there. She goes out to give her lessons, and I believe this is one of the evenings. Let me take the jewel-case to her and speak about it now; in another minute papa will come in; and I am sure you will feel happier for having come to a decision. It may be a long time before you and I can have such another long uninterrupted talk, and it would be a pity to let it go for nothing. Would you like to look at the necklace, and say good-bye to it before it goes, mamma?"

Emmie's finger, as she spoke, was on the spring of the purple case which she had previously taken from

the box on her knee, and her eyes looked pleasantly expectant, but her mother made a hasty negative gesture.

"No, no, dear, I don't want to look at it again. I said good-bye to all that it means for me a long, long time ago; and if you are not to wear it, I had rather never see it. Put the case into your pocket, and carry it to Katherine while papa and I are at dinner. If we women can manage the matter among ourselves, I shall be thankful. My conscience will be easier for not having drawn Harry into our little conspiracy, since I must conceal it from your father for the present. There, is not that papa's step outside? Run away, dearest—run away, and put the jewel-box exactly in its usual place on my dressing-table, so that there may be nothing to strike your father's eye when he goes into the room to dress for dinner. I shall tell him that I have been obliged to part with the necklace, some day, Emmie dear; but I want to spare him the pain of knowing exactly when it was done, and of following us in all the painful little details of the business. The loss is his as well as ours; but we can spare him part of the degradation. Yes, run away, Emmie dear, and leave me alone. Your father likes best now to find me alone here when he first comes in, weary and out of spirits."

CHAPTER III.

IDUNA'S GROVE.

Treasures there are many,
Necklaces many;
But on the breast
Of Freyja alone
Glitters the noble
Brisinga necklace.

Norse Lay.

MR. WEST was accustomed to have to wait even on cold evenings a long time at his own door before it was opened to him, and he had learned to shut his ears, when at last he was admitted, to a good many sounds of scuffling feet and sharp voices, which told of hasty preparations to receive him. He did not care now to

probe beyond the outside surface of decorum and order, which was indeed too thin to deceive eyes that did not court deception. There had been a time when he had stood up for his right to know everything that passed in his own house, and devoutly believed in his power to regulate all in his own way, and carry out his wishes to the minutest point. He had been a martinet when nothing had opposed him but the wills of people weaker than himself. Lately, circumstances, and, as it had seemed to him, the whole course of nature had declared against him; and being continually more and more worsted in his combats with these, he had withdrawn himself gradually into closer and closer entrenchments, abandoning the outworks in despair, but always struggling to keep some little kingdom where his will might be supreme, and whose minute details he might regulate. The management of his family and household had baffled him now for some time, and he was at present, with the energy of despair, holding on to the attempt to maintain his own personal surroundings precisely as they used to be in the days of his prosperity. Even this possibility was daily slipping away, in spite of the efforts of his wife and elder children to keep this last stronghold of his injured dignity intact. They were wondering, with sick hearts, what hold on life he would have when the thin appearance of past gentility they were holding up before his eyes had at length melted away.

Emmie had time to restore the jewel-box to its usual place before Mary Anne had made herself fit to open the door for master, and her next movement was a hasty flight up two staircases to the threshold of "Air Throne." Thence she watched her father's entrance into the house, peeping at him over the balusters of the highest staircase of the high house. She was not at any time given to make the worst of appearances, but to-day she was struck with the dejection written on her father's face, and expressed by his whole figure, as he wearily mounted the first flight to his own bedroom: the nerveless hand clinging to the balusters, the trailing footstep, the bowed head, the gray, still face, that had perhaps been handsome and dignified once, but that seemed now petrified to an image of sullen, outraged pride, brooding on itself.

Emmie sighed and shivered a little as she looked. It was just as if the fog outside had gathered itself up into a visible shape, and stalked into the house to put out all the lights, and hang a dead weight on everyone's breathing. But it was her father, and she must not grudge him the privilege of bringing what atmosphere he liked into the house, during the few hours he was in it, even if it was an atmosphere of chill, gloomy reserve, in which the most modest little household joys withered, or had to hide themselves away. Her mother was unfortunately the chief sufferer, for she had to sit in the very thickest of the fog the whole evening. To the other members of the family it made itself felt more or less distinctly, hushing fresh voices, putting clogs on springing steps, checking with a dull hand the eager beating of young, hopeful hearts. But (and Emmie's sensitive conscience reproached her a little for finding relief in this thought) there were spots even under this roof whence the dark influence was successfully shut out—pleasant nooks—when, by just opening and shutting a door, one could find oneself breathing fresh air and morally basking in sunshine. As this thought rose to comfort her, she turned and looked down a dark passage, at the end of which a faint stream of light issued from the crevices of a low door. Behind it was "Air Throne," and from thence a crisp cheerful sound, like the rippling of a little river, reached Emmie where she stood; a pleasant sound of two gay voices in continuous chatter, broken now by a musical laugh—Christabel's laugh, that was music itself—ringing from the low-roofed attic down the dark, cold passage, and warming Emmie's heart. Well that it was such a big house, and the attics far enough removed from the ground-floor for people to dare to laugh freely there without fear of being thought hard-hearted.

Looking down the balusters towards a lower story, she could see a half-opened door, from which another wider and brighter stream of light came. Emmie could have wished that door were shut, for her father would pass it in going downstairs, and the lavish light would bring him a reminder that would not please him. That, however, was the "Land of Beulah," and Mrs. Urquhart,

the kind-hearted old lady, who, with her son Dr. Urquhart, rented all the best rooms in the house, was too important a person to be dictated to as to when she should shut or open her drawing-room door. The door was left ajar because Dr. Urquhart had not yet returned from his afternoon round of visits to his patients, and his mother was listening for his ring at the bell. Emmie knew just how she looked as she sat listening, for she had lately shared the watch once or twice—not anxious, only pleasantly expectant—and she knew too how the comely old face would broaden into smiles of perfect content, when the quick, business-like knock and ring came, followed by a springy step on the stairs that all the household knew. The drawing-room door was always close shut after that for the rest of the evening; but though it shut in long spaces of silence, there was no gloom. Emmie could not continue the scene; but if she had been clairvoyante, and had watched the occupants of the “Land of Beulah” till bed-time, she would only have seen pictures that would have confirmed her pleasant thoughts of the place. The old mother nodding over her parti-coloured knitting, when the cosy meal was over; the son with his books and papers and shaded reading-lamp at a table writing, covering his eyes to think a minute, and then rapidly dashing off a page or two with nervous fingers pressed on the pen, and knitted brow under the thick fair hair; aware, however, of every movement in the chair by the fire, and ready, when the signal came, to jump up, thrust his long fingers through his hair, clearing his brow of thought and frowns with the movement, and come forward to the fire for a comfortable half-hour’s chat with his mother before she retired to bed. This was the crowning cup of pleasure in the tranquil days Mrs. Urquhart shared with her now prosperous son; days that were a sojourning in the “Land of Beulah” to her at the end of a stormy life, as she often told Emmie. It was talk that had no pain and not much excitement in it, over the happy events of each successful day, flavoured sometimes with a mild joke or two about the young lady-students upstairs, whom Dr. Urquhart came across sometimes in lecture-rooms, in whose company (he said) he felt puzzled as

to whether he should treat them as comrades or as young ladies, and against whose possible designs on her son's heart Mrs. Urquhart, generous in everything else, watched jealously. Perhaps there would be a little sham quarrel when Mrs. Urquhart would maliciously repeat some gossip about the Moores she had learned from Emmie, and Dr. Urquhart would pretend a great deal of excitement in defending them; all to be ended by a tenderer than usual good-night kiss.

Yes, there was pleasant talk from happy hearts in that room every evening, but the gay atmosphere never penetrated to the parlour just beneath, where Mr. and Mrs. West spent their evenings alone; she lying on the high-backed sofa by the wall, he seated upright on a chair beside her, their hands clasped together, not talking much, not often even looking at each other, but mutely interchanging pain, and lessening it perhaps by such silent partnership; she suffering only for him, he for himself chiefly, but also for all the others dependent upon him whom he had dragged down into what looked to him an abyss of shame and ruin. He was like a shipwrecked mariner on a raft in a wide sea—the sea of his own bitter thoughts—clinging to the one comrade who had courage to embark with him on its salt, desolate waves, but separated from all other help. Yet, if he could but have cleared his eyes from the mists of tears that pride would never let him weep away, he might have seen that the storms which to his thought had shattered his whole existence, had but carried off a few useless spars and a little overcrowded canvas, and that all his real treasures were still preserved to him, and were lying unheeded at his feet.

Emmie stood leaning her arms on the balusters, and looking down into the hall, till she had seen her father recross it and shut himself up in the dining-room, and then she too ran lightly down. A thought had struck her while waiting which had changed her intention of going immediately to "Air Throne," to tell the story of the jewel-case to Katherine Moore. She must find out from Harry whether there was to his knowledge any fresh cause for the additional shade of misery she had read on her father's face, or whether it was only one of

those chance thickenings of the fog of gloom in his mind, which they had learnt to expect as certainly, and endure as patiently, as January snow-storms, or east winds in March. Harry had come home as usual a quarter of an hour after Mr. West, and had made the most of the interval before dinner, while his father was upstairs, to bring the brightness no one could help feeling in his presence, to bear upon his mother; but when Emmie found him he had retreated to the little tea-room, once a butler's pantry, where noise being fortunately shut in by double doors, the younger members of the family were accustomed to congregate in the evening. Mr. West had not been known to put his head inside the green-baize doors for years; and Mrs. West, since Dr. Urquhart had one day spoken gravely to her on the necessity of sparing herself fatigue, had paid it few visits. It was the spot which, according to Alma, had played an important part in turning Constance Rivers into Lady Forrest; but less fastidious and more imaginative persons might have seen a "Temple of Youth," or even an "Iduna's Grove," within the four dingily-papered walls, cumbered with faded furniture. It was the one place in the house where the naturally high spirits of the young Wests had free play, and managed to bubble up above the dull crust of care which extinguished them outside the sanctuary. Old Mary Anne, whose forty years of domestic service had left more poetry in her than three London seasons had left to Constance, was capable of disentangling the genius of the place from the moth-holes and weather-stains of the furniture, and used of evenings to steal up from her cleaning in desolate regions below, where hungry winds moaned through empty cellars and larders, to refresh herself by standing between the double doors, and listening to the gay racket of voices within. It sent her back to her cogitations as to how to dish up two mutton cutlets to look as if they were five with renewed courage, convinced that there were still members of the West family worth cooking for, at reduced wages. Emmie closed the double doors quickly behind her, however, mindful of ears in the house that had a right to complain of hubbub; for as she had been longer absent from the juvenile party than usual, there was of

course a great outcry to greet her reappearance—everybody speaking at the top of their voices and at once.

“Where have you been all the afternoon, Emmie? Have you heard about the row on the stairs when the boys came home at five o’clock? Casabianca and the Gentle Lamb would play at ‘tig’ on the stairs, thinking everybody was out, and they quarrelled and fought on the landing, till Casabianca knocked the Gentle Lamb right into the ‘Land of Beulah.’ Two old ladies were drinking tea with Mrs. Urquhart, and you should have seen their faces when the Gentle Lamb came rolling through, and fell with his head among the tea-cups.”

The speaker of the last sentence was Mildred West, a tall, energetic-looking girl of fourteen, somewhat given to domineering, and nicknamed Mildie by the rest of the family, in the exercise of a peculiar style of wit prevalent in Iduna’s Grove, which consisted in calling everything by the least appropriate name that could be found for it. The fun of these names might not be apparent to outsiders, but they afforded great satisfaction to the young Wests, and were in fact the chief weapons by which they held the troubles of life at bay, and, so to speak, kept their heads above water; a new privation or grievance always seeming to lose its sting with these young people as soon as one of their number had invented a by-word to fling at it.

Emmie shook her head at the two offenders, who were now struggling for possession of the least rickety of the school-room chairs, and said to her sister:

“But what were you doing to let them fight on Mrs. Urquhart’s landing, Mildie?”

“My Physics,” said Mildie, loftily; “I was in the middle of a proposition; and I think with Katherine Moore, that a girl’s studies are too important for her to allow them to be interrupted by the folly of boys. Women are the students of the future, Katherine says, and I mean to do credit to my family, whatever becomes of the others.”

Of course this speech was a signal for a general onslaught of the boys on Mildie; but Harry, who did not

seem quite in his usual spirits to-night, checked the skirmish peremptorily; and, while the rest of the party were taking their seats round the tea-table, Emmie found the opportunity she wanted of drawing him aside to ask her question.

"Anything happened to-day?" she whispered.

"Bad—do you mean?"

"Oh, my dear Harry, of course I meant to papa; and does anything good ever happen to him—should I expect that?"

"The poor Governor," said Harry, with a good deal more compassion in his voice than there had been in Emmie's. "He certainly is unlucky, poor old chap; he always does contrive to get himself into every mess that's going. If he could but stick to what he's told to do, and not put his unlucky oar in where it's not wanted, he might at least drudge on without being noticed, like the rest of us. But I suppose it is difficult for him to forget the time when he was one of the heads, and ordered as he liked, and to remember that he's nothing in the new house but an old supernumerary clerk, kept on sufferance. It must be hard."

"But has anything more than usual happened to-day to annoy him, do you suppose?"

"Mr. Cummins sent for him to his private room to speak about his having taken more upon himself than he ought in a business matter that came under his eye, and, of course, muddled it. Their voices got so loud—for you know when the Governor's pride is thoroughly stung he can speak, and Cummins is an insolent brute—that a good deal was overheard in the clerks' room. I can tell you, Emmie, I sat trembling, for every minute I expected, and at last hoped, that the Governor would end the lecture he was getting by throwing up his place and mine, and vowing never to make a pen-stroke in the old hole again. I wonder how he helped it. I wonder how he ever swallowed his pride and rage, so as to get out of that room without a regular flare up; and how he bore to walk back to his place, with the other clerks staring at him. All of them young fellows like myself, except two superannuated old chaps, who began in grandpapa's time I believe, and who, like old idiots as they are, tried

to show they pitied him. It was an awful time for us both I can tell you, I daren't so much as look at him, to see how he was taking it, but I could feel the desk we were both writing at tremble when he leaned upon it again and took up his pen. Poor old chap!"

"If he should quarrel with Mr. Cummins some day and throw up his post and yours, what would become of us?"

"I daresay I should get employment somewhere else; but wherever he went it would be the same story—the impossibility it is for him to act as a subordinate, and his ill-luck. I am afraid he is not of much use where he is, and that though Cummins can't turn him out, for it was agreed he was to have a post in the office when the old firm was broken up, he is trying all he can to provoke him to resign."

"We should still have the house and the lodgers."

"The lease will be out the year after next."

"Poor mother," said Emmie, softly.

"Poor old Governor," said Harry, passing his hand quickly over his frank boyish eyes. "Well, he fought a good fight to-day, to hold back the words that would have made us all beggars; and if I can only keep a sharp look-out over him, and stop him from running off the lines again, things may never really be as bad as we are imagining. I believe the Governor would rather blow out his brains any day than stand Cummins' bullying; but he will bear a great deal for the mother and us; and I must keep my eyes about me, without his knowing it, and nip in the bud any fresh designs of his that won't hold water."

"I thought you said that Mr. Cummins was the new youngish partner, who had taken a liking to you, and who invited you to dine with him at his club one day?"

"Yes," said Harry, "and what do you think one of the clerks overheard him saying he did it for?—because, though my father was an old dolt, and I something of a cub, I had a confoundedly pretty sister."

"What did he mean? *Me*? Oh, Harry!" cried Emmie, taking her hands from Harry's shoulders, where she had been resting them confidingly, and covering her face, while, in a minute, a dark flood of angry crimson

glowed above the white finger-tips to the roots of her dark hair, and invaded the small lobes of the little ears that showed beneath its coils. "He meant me!"

Harry put his arm round her and drew her close to him, his face glowing too with a proud sense of brotherly protection and superior worldly wisdom.

"Why, Emmie, what signifies what a fool of a fellow like that says? I would not have repeated his idiotic words, if I thought you'd have cared a rush about them."

"To be talked about like that from one person to another," said Emmie, slowly uncovering her eyes, which to Harry's remorse had large bright tears in them. "I knew he looked at me in a horrid way that day—the day I went in a cab to fetch papa home, when poor little Willie was taken in his first fit; but I did not know he had talked about me."

"You are a fine little personage," said Harry, stooping down and kissing a tear from her cheek. "You're a nice little person to pretend to be a friend of Miss Katherine Moore, who gets up and speaks in public meetings, and stands up for women's rights, if you can't bear to be talked about."

"It is the sort of talk," said Emmie. "I can't explain it, but no one would understand me better than Katherine Moore. It is the right to be spoken about and looked at in another way, whether one is rich, or poor, or handsome, or ugly, that she stands up for—for women. Never mind, dear Harry; don't be vexed with yourself. I won't think of it again; but you must allow that it is horrid to be looked at, as Mr. Cummins looked at me, just because one happens to have come out in a hurry with a shabby hat and dress on. I wonder how girls feel who never have such things to do, who, like Alma Rivers, have fathers they are proud of belonging to, whom everybody is forced to respect. The last time I was at a party at the Rivers's, Alma dropped her fan while she was dancing, and half-a-dozen people rushed to pick it up, and Mr. Anstice gave it back to her with a look—as if he thought she ought to be waited upon by people on their knees. It must make one feel very odd—that way of being looked at."

"Well," said Harry, "I don't suppose there's much

chance of our poor old Governor ever holding up his head with Lord Justice Rivers again ; but it would be hard lines on him if his children had a grudge against him for that. Don't be down-hearted, Emmie ; at all events, you've got a brother to stick up for you, and punch on the head anyone from this time forth who looks at you in a way you don't like. Christabel Moore has not even that."

"She is far above wanting any help," said Emmie enthusiastically ; "and, Harry dear, I'm not so selfish or so silly as to wish you to quarrel with Mr. Cummins because he was rude to me. You must think of keeping things straight for papa's sake, and forget my little vexations. There, look, my face is all right again now. I can bear it. Papa has to bear being looked down on, and spoken to roughly every day, you say. I have not thought enough about that. I shall pity him more now when he comes in with a gloomy face, and grudge less the trouble mamma takes to keep home vexations from him. Do you know, Harry, she has made up her mind to sell her pearls?—the necklace and pendants she used to wear on company nights. I have the case in my pocket now, and I am going after tea to consult Katherine Moore about getting her jeweller to find out how much they are worth, and put us in the way of selling them. Do you remember how we used to take peeps at them in their case when we were children, and how lovely mamma looked when she had them on?"

"She don't want pearls for that," said Harry stoutly ; "and as for you and Mildie, young ladies whose bosom friends study medicine and take to public speaking, are mountains high above caring for jewels, I suppose. But let us have a look before they go. It's something to have had big pearls in the family, is it not?"

"Will you look at them here?" said Emmie, cautiously drawing a corner of the purple case from her pocket. "Can we trust Casabianca and the Gentle Lamb?"

"I'll undertake them," said Harry. "I think they ought to see mother's pearls once. Now, children," (raising his voice) "we are going to show you the family jewels ; but if anyone of you comes too near, and so much as breathes upon them, under the table that one goes before he has time to wink, and stays there for the

rest of the evening. Now, attention, and keep your places," taking the case from Emmie, and touching the spring as he spoke.

Even Mildie condescended to be enthusiastically admiring, though she excused her interest on the plea that pearls were an abnormal product of nature, on whose natural history she was, on the smallest encouragement, willing to enlighten an ignorant public. The public, however, preferred ignorant wonder, and to expend its energy on a dance of triumph round the case.

"If Emmie would only come to church in 'em once," suggested Casabianca (*alias* Aubrey West), who owed his sobriquet to his unlikeness to Mrs. Hemans' martyr to obedience, "wouldn't I bring Tom Winter there to see her; and would not he think small beer of all his own people after that!"

"Or she might wear them when she goes with us to the athletic sports next summer for all our fellows to see," amended the Gentle Lamb. "Or, I say, Emmie, you might set them up as prizes for fellows to jump for, and I'd promise to win them back for you at long jump. Would not it be jolly fun?"

"You fool," said Casabianca. "What would be the good of giving Tom Winter a chance of winning them, and bringing his sister to church in them instead of Emmie? You'll let Tom Winter see you in 'em some day, won't you, Emmie? He'll never believe we've had such things in our family unless he sees you in them, however much I tell him."

"What signifies Tom Winter," put in Sidney, a bright-eyed boy of seven, Emmie's secret pet, and favourite of the fry. "What signifies what he thinks of our sister? You are a great deal too good for him to look at, Emmie, even without the pearls. Now I advise you to put them on directly, and go upstairs and show yourself in them to Dr. Urquhart. He has promised to give me a microscope, so you'd better please him all you can."

This suggestion brought such a return of flush to Emmie's scarcely cooled cheeks, that Harry would have rewarded the speaker with a seat under the table, if Mildie had not luckily struck in with a proposition that

pleased everybody. Why should not Emmie put on the pearls for them all to see, and wear them through the evening, just to familiarise the younger ones with the spectacle of the family grandeur, which would otherwise never be anything but a tradition to them. Let them at least be able to think they knew how mamma had looked in the days of which old Mary Anne told them so many stories. Emmie, though she had been sharing her mother's sorrows with full sympathy all the afternoon, and weeping over her father's and her own a minute ago, had light-heartedness enough left in her to yield to the general wish without much pressing. She had often wondered how the cold smooth stones would feel on her neck, and how the milk-white band of mingled pearls and diamonds would show among her dark braids just above her forehead;—would she look dignified like Alma in them—the sort of person to be approached with distant admiration, such as she had seen in Mr. Anstice's eyes?

This evening was the last chance of having her curiosity set at rest, and as the gas was still burning in the dressing-room her father had lately left, it would only take her a minute to discover what sort of a new Emmie would look out of the depths of the great mirror, which her mother had only retained, because old Mrs. Urquhart preferred putting on her cap before a less pretentious looking-glass. She ran lightly upstairs, and after a little preliminary arrangement of her everyday evening-dress, so as to leave a portion of her white neck and arms clear for the pearls to rest on, she took the jewels from their case, with almost trembling fingers, and clasped the necklace round her slim throat. It fell low on her neck, and how lustrous the milk-white stones showed there, rising and falling with her quick breath, like flecks of moonlight on a blown drift of snow! The bracelets were hard to manage, for they would keep falling over her hands; but the head-band fitted exactly, and looked just as it used to look long ago on Mrs. West's head—a pale pure halo crowning the dusky night of hair, and giving a sort of soft dignity to the smiling face beneath it. Emmie did not think such words, or any like them; but as she stepped backwards, and looked at the reflection in the mirror, she was certainly not displeased with what she

saw. It was not Alma—it was only Emmie after all—but still an Emmie who might wear the traditional family pearls for one night in the sight of the boys, and perhaps of Katherine and Christabel Moore, without disgracing them. It was too late to go up to “Air Throne” now, and introduce the jewels in this guise to the friend whose aid in selling them was to be asked. She must wait to settle that business till the Moores came back from giving their evening lessons; but as Emmie descended the stairs she thought of a person who had a right to a farewell inspection of these relics of past grandeur, if love of them, and pride in them, counted for anything. Old Mary Anne would be sure to discover or guess the new abstraction from her mistress’s jewel-box, by its effect on the weekly expenditure, and there was wisdom in stopping her mouth from remonstrance, by appearing to take her into their counsels beforehand. Besides, she had been particularly gracious towards the attic lodgers lately, and deserved the confidence that she valued more than wages.

With this design in her mind, Emmie passed the green-baize door, without opening it, and descended to the basement story. The air of its wide passages, always clear and cold, made her shiver, but they were less dark than usual; someone had turned on the gas-jet at the foot of the staircase, and Mary Anne was standing underneath it talking to a black-coated figure, that, at the sound of Emmie’s step, turned round and came forward to meet her. It was Dr. Urquhart. He did not look surprised at the apparition of a figure so adorned on the kitchen-stairs, as a person less intent on the business in hand might; he came quickly to her and spoke at once:

“Miss West! how fortunate! you are the person I am seeking. I am sorry to tell you that one of the young ladies who lives upstairs has been knocked down at the corner of a street close by, and is, I fear, seriously hurt. She was taken into a shop near, and I was sent for, and finding she could be moved, I am having her brought home. Your mother must be warned, however, of what has happened before the commotion of carrying her through the hall begins. I hurried in first to get hold of

you. Now, can you go in and tell your mother at once, without startling her, or shall I do it?"

Emmie turned very white at the first word, and her voice shook as she said:

"One of the Moores! Oh! not Katherine?"

"It is the elder of the two ladies; but, Miss West, you must not faint, if you please. There is a great deal for everyone to do, and your mother must be thought of."

Emmie was not in danger of fainting; accidents were too rife among the boys for her nerves not to be case-hardened; but if she had had any disposition to give way, these words, and the smile that accompanied them, encouraging but peremptory, would have acted as a tonic.

"I think I had better go to mamma," she said. "If she sees you unexpectedly, she will fancy at once that something has happened to one of the boys."

"Right—she is easily alarmed, and ought not to be allowed to agitate herself. Go into the dining-room first, and prepare her with a word or two, and I will follow and explain the arrangements it is necessary to make at once."

As they passed the green-baize door, Emmie said:

"I must look in here for a minute, and tell Harry to keep the children quiet, or they will wonder what has become of me, and all rush out into the hall."

She left the door open during her brief talk with Harry at the tea-table, and when she came back, she saw that Dr. Urquhart's sensible grey eyes were fixed upon her with an expression in them she had never seen there before, as if he had just made some discovery about her which put the prominent thought of the moment out of his head.

It startled her back into a recollection of what she had been doing before the news of the accident came, and as she raised her hand to the jewels in her hair, she could not keep back an exclamation of dismay.

"Oh! Dr. Urquhart, what am I to do? I dressed myself up in these things to please the children, and I dare not go into the dining-room as I am now—it would make papa so angry."

"Would it indeed? How long will it take you to put them off?"

"About two minutes."

Dr. Urquhart took out his watch.

"I can give you two minutes," he said; "there will still be time for what we have to do; but you must not be longer."

Emmie ran breathlessly upstairs, and Dr. Urquhart returned his watch to his pocket and stood looking after her. Sidney, who had crept to the door to learn as much as possible of what was going on, observed him closely for a second or two, and then went back to his seat, and announced the result of his investigation to his brothers.

"Well," he said, "I told you that Dr. Urquhart would like to see Emmie with the pearls on, and I was quite right—he did like it."

CHAPTER IV.

AIR THRONE.

Heaven hath its crown of stars, the earth
Her glory robe of flowers—
The sea its gems—the grand old woods
Their songs and greening showers:
The birds have homes, where leaves and blooms
In beauty wreath above;
High yearning hearts, their rainbow dream—
And we, sweet! we have love.

GERALD MASSEY.

THE house that Mr. West held on a long lease, though situated in a part of London long since deserted by the tide of fashion, had had its day of splendour, and was built in a solid generous fashion, liberal of space and of inside decoration, which does not prevail in modern buildings. Even the rooms under the roof showed signs of careful finish, and had possibilities of being made comfortable and even picturesque, which caused Katherine and Christabel Moore to congratulate themselves nearly every day on the good luck which had timed their arrival in London, to the crisis when Mrs. West, the only person to

whom they had a letter of introduction, was looking out for occupants for her unused upper rooms. It was a step towards the realisation of the hopes that had brought them, unknown, unprotected, and young, to fight for the means of existence in the very spot where the struggle is hottest, that they could hardly have expected to gain so easily. Katherine was glad to be able to write to the few friends, who had not thrown them off in disgust at their rashness and Utopian views of life, that she and her sister were living under the roof of a lady known to their mother in past days. It made the remonstrances that had been addressed to her, on the dangers to which her independent modes of action might expose her sister, less disagreeable to remember. Christabel used to look over her sister's shoulder as she wrote this announcement, and profess to be a little scandalised at her finding any satisfaction in throwing such a sop as this to the Mrs. Grundies they had left behind them. If they had determined to be independent of conventional restraints, and to trust for protection to their own upright wills and strong resolution to carve out worthy careers for themselves, why should they have recourse to pretences like this, and make concessions to other people's scruples, which had in them, at least, a flavour of distrust in their own theories? Christabel would peer down saucily as she spoke into Katherine's quiet, strong face, which looked so incapable of pretences or concessions, that it was a sort of joke to accuse her of them; and Katherine would reply, with an answering glance of fond admiring love, whose presence would explain even greater inconsistencies in a feminine adventurer on new paths. It might be all very well to burn one's boats, and cut off all retreat to the old country if one started on the journey of exploration alone, but when there was another by one's side, whose fate was a million times more momentous, then——: no! Katherine never could bring herself to say she was not thankful to have the ægis of Mrs. West's respectability thrown over their enterprises. Even when she was indulging in her most soaring day-dream of the future triumph of what she called "her cause," foolish, nervous Mrs. West's motherliness would recur to her memory, as a sort of stronghold in the background, into which

Christabel at least might always run and be safe from slanderous tongues.

That *arrière-pensée*, even more than their other recommendations, made the low-roofed attics a really home-like place to Katherine, and sent her out from them to the arduous struggle of her student life, and to the teaching that filled up its spare hours, with a courage that had known no check as yet.

It was no easy life the orphan sisters led together there; but they had known so much worse things than toil and privation, that these came to them almost in the guise of interesting new acquaintance, and were met with a gay defiant welcome that forced them to put on their least repellent looks. What hardship was there in sitting down to bread-and-tea meals which their own labour had paid for, to people who were used to eating sumptuous meals made bitter by taunts of dependence, or cold, silent tokens of antagonism and dislike? Christabel, whose ardent, imaginative character had suffered most in the atmosphere of suppression from which they had escaped, and who, being the younger by some years, did not share Katherine's feelings of responsibility, found such delight in the mere fact of their freedom that her spirits were always ready to bubble up under the weight of a privation or toil, and lift it to the height of a pleasure, or a welcome experience at least. Weariness might come by-and-by, but she was so far from it yet, that there was even energy left to seek out difficulties and obstacles for the mere joy of overcoming them and proving her strength. Mr. Carlyle, in his essay on Jean Paul Richter, excuses the German poet's defiance of public opinion in his celebrated "clothes' controversy," by pointing out that a youthful disposition to be combative in unimportant matters while a great life-struggle is also going on, shows a reserved fund of energy which leads one to augur well for the chance of victory in the serious endeavour. Dare any of Christabel's female friends have so augured from her indulgence in little vagaries of taste in dress, or from her small defiances of public opinion in minor social questions, seeing nothing in these mutinies but the overflowing bravery of a strong spirit on its way to success, or must they have looked grave, considering

that the path of a woman who aims at making an independent career for herself is already too difficult for it to be safe for her to plant a needless thorn upon it?

The sisters, who had formerly scarcely ever known what it was to be an hour apart, were now separated during the greater part of each day, by having to carry on their different sorts of work in different places; but this circumstance only made the reunion that came in the evening an ever-recurring love-feast that lost nothing of its gladness by being constantly repeated. Katherine's eyes were always just as hungry for the sight of Christabel's face as on the evening when she had returned to the attic after her first day's study, and found her sister at home before her, and Christabel was never less eager to pour out the history of the day's doings into Katherine's ears. The talk and the love-making they had been used to spread over the whole day had all to be crowded into a few evening hours now; no wonder the sound of their voices came like a rippling river from Air Throne, when Emmie West stood and listened outside. Christabel's outpouring of talk generally came first. She said a little about what she had done and seen during the day; and then a great deal about what had been transacted in that inner world of imagination which was to her the most real world she knew. Katherine followed her sympathetically through both narratives—first, through the little outer court of actual experience, where the figures were often somewhat dull and pale, as not having had power to force an impression of themselves through the dream-halo in which Christabel walked, then passing as it were through a curtain into the theatre, where as yet all the most moving events of Christabel's life had been transacted—the brightly-lighted, gaily-coloured drama of her thoughts and dreams. The dream-people who performed there were so much the most congenial companions the sisters had, that to Katherine as much as to Christabel it was a coming home to rest, after work among strangers.

When a day in dreamland had been well lived through, Katherine's time to tell her experience came. Her separate life had only its outer court that could be talked about; but it was a very different sort of outer court from Christabel's. Very real and distinctly seen, if in some

respects strange and different from her expectations. Her daily story of hard unaided work, of hindrances obtrusively thrust in the way, of snubs and slights meeting her at every step in her enterprise, was always told shortly, in plain words, without a tinge of bitterness in them. She could not afford to let herself speak bitterly; it would have cost too much of the force she had to husband for each day's struggle. It was only when something of a contrary nature had to be related—when some unexpected word of encouragement had come her way, when some hand in authority had been held out to help her up, instead of to push her down, or when some service had been rendered by a fellow-student in such a way as neither to wound her feminine susceptibility nor hurt her independence; it was only on the rare occasions when things of this kind came into the day's history, that her voice warmed up, and her lip trembled, and her eyes, fixed on Christabel's face, took a depth of feeling, which told Christabel how far into the proud sensitive heart the usual experience of contempt and coldness cut down.

A short silence would sometimes follow on the end of Katherine's story. The two sisters would sit hand-in-hand leaning against each other, Katherine's soft dusky braids touching Christabel's rich auburn, the two hearts beating to the same tune, for they were thinking of each other. It was the gravest moment of their day. The pause after hard work and after the joy of meeting again, when anxious thoughts and doubts, if any were at hand, knocked at the door. Christabel would soon escape from them back into her dream-world; but Katherine often had a hard struggle to wrench herself away from what she felt were disabling forebodings, cowardly lookings back, to a past from which they had cut themselves off. Yet the question would come, had she done right to bring Christabel here with her? If she should fail, and for all her toils and struggles, reap only the blame of having tried to thrust herself where she was not wanted; if she did not prove herself stronger than all the strong prejudices arrayed against her; if she had to fall back beaten in the hard battle she had entered on, what retreat was left to them? The old sphere would not open again to receive them, or if it would, their position in it had been

hard before, but would be intolerable when they went back with the disgrace and ridicule of such an attempt and such a failure fixed upon them. She could bear anything for herself, but Christabel was such a rare treasure to guard; so bright and tender to those who loved her—such an enigma to all others; so rich in gifts that yet needed tender encouragement to give them fair play; such an enthusiast for work and for high thoughts, and after all such a dreamer. Katherine's arm would tighten its hold on her sister's waist as her thoughts reached some such point; and Christabel, startled out of a fancy that had taken her worlds away, would look up suddenly into her sister's face, with surprised wide-open blue eyes, bright and yet misty, and the far-off sweet look in them which comes from habitually dwelling on distances invisible to ordinary eyes.

A change of place for these evening talks, from the neighbourhood of the wide-hobbed fireplace to the window-seat of the low attic window, was the principal event by which the sisters marked the passing of the seasons in their present life, too full of work to be monotonous, and yet having few breaks in it.

The first months of their freedom—their hardest and loneliest, and yet perhaps their gayest time—had been fire-side months, when the hearth-rug (a dingy black and gray one, knitted from strips of cloth by some West of a past generation) had been Christabel's throne for the greater part of the evening, and when Katherine's household thoughts had turned chiefly on schemes for bringing her medical books and her papers to the draughty end of the table, and leaving the cosiest nooks for Christabel's easel and the embroidery frame, to which she gave an hour or two every night. The lengthening days, when there had been light but not warmth far into the evening, had not been an improvement; and then, quite suddenly, as it seemed, there had come a time when the low-roofed attics had turned into furnaces filled with lifeless air, and the hour for comfortable talk had to be put off almost till bedtime; then at last, weary with the long hot day, they would sit by the open window and watch the crimson in the west die out into a uniform pearly grey over miles and miles of monotonous roof-lines, down to a distance where the dome

of St. Paul's lifted itself, round and perfect, into the empty evening sky. The pain and the pleasure of that time, too, had passed, and now here they were again, with the shiny black bars of the grate for their evening prospect. What had been their gains and losses since Christabel, on the first day of their taking possession of the rooms, had exercised her ingenuity in turning every bit of carving into a picture illustrative of the rapid development of the fortune they had come to seek? They had been discussing the question together when Emmie heard their voices, as she stood at the head of the stairs, and Christabel's laugh testified that the retrospect had not saddened them. While she could laugh—such a gay, free-hearted laugh, too—all must be well with Katherine; well with her heart, at least; for Katherine was too far-sighted not to be subject to twinges of mental anxiety, even when filled with present heart-content.

Even now, when she got up, with the echo of Christabel's happy laughter still in her ears, she felt only half-satisfied with their late outpouring of confidence, and wished she could have penetrated deeper than words could reveal, and read the yet unformed thoughts, the hopes and purposes to come, whose seeds lay in her sister's soul. Would the time ever arrive when she would begin to be "sick of shadows," and take to looking at life as it really was, and if so, in what guise would the awakening come? Would some new influence dawn in her life strong enough to merge her two worlds into one, and force her to act and suffer among realities with the same intensity with which she was now dreaming them all in her own way? Katherine knew of only one influence that was likely to do for Christabel what the mere friction of everyday experience was rapidly doing for herself, and it was an influence which, when they began to live their independent life, and put themselves out of the way of being sought by their equals, they had decided must never come near them. Christabel had better go on dreaming to old age, Katherine thought, than come out into the daylight of reality through that door. She paused with an armful of anatomical drawings—her last night's work—which she was going to put away on a high shelf, to comfort herself with a reassuring study of her sister's face. Christabel was lying at full length

on the hearth-rug, spreading out the long skirt of her serge dress, cut after some artistic design, more pleasant to the eye than convenient to the pedestrian, to dry by the fire; for the same purpose she had let down her thick hair, which the small hat she wore had badly protected from mist and rain; and she was now propping herself on her elbows, and resting her face upon the palms of her hands, as she read a book open before her.

"Luckily," Katherine thought, "it was a face that could easily pass in and out among crowds without attracting many eyes to it—

*Pâle et pourtant rose,
Petite avec grands yeux."*

There was that in the soft outlines and dim colouring which gave an effect of remoteness, as of something dropped into a place to which it did not belong; a lack of responsiveness in feature and expression that would deaden most people's interest rather than provoke it. Nobody but Katherine ever saw the sleeping beauty in the face wake up; to all others it was shrouded, shut out from their seeing as completely as Christabel's soul was cut off from ordinary contact by her dreams. Well, it was best so. Katherine satisfied herself that this year had not brought a hair's-breadth of change; even the rose hue under the fair skin was not faded by toil or privation; there was not a line of care on the broad low brow or round the dreamy mouth; the delicate chin propped between the two hands had not sharpened in outline. It would be difficult to point out the lightest sign of the passage of another year over that fair drooping head. Does living among dreams make one, so long as it lasts, fadeless, like them?

"Listen, Katherine," Christabel said suddenly, looking up from her book; "it is Pascal speaking of imagination: 'Ce pouvoir énorme; l'ennemi éternel de la raison, qui se plaît à étaler son empire en l'amenant dessous ses pieds, a crée dans l'homme une seconde nature. Il a ses joies, ses douleurs, sa santé, son malâise, ses richesses, sa pauvreté. Il arrête l'empire des sens, et encore il leur fait part d'une pénétration artificielle.'"

"Are you looking out passages from Pascal to read

with old David Macvie?" Katherine asked. "Is not that travelling rather fast?"

"Plums," said Christabel. "Of course it won't be much of a French lesson; but we have drudged on at the grammar so many evenings lately that I think I may give him a treat. It will be great fun for me, too, to see and hear. I wish you could be with us. He will read the paragraph through first in his good solid Scotch-French, then I shall give him the English of a word or two he will not have understood, and gradually the full meaning of the passage will dawn upon him, and he will begin to knit and unknit the wrinkles about his forehead till his face spreads out into a blaze of comprehension and delight; the spectacles will come off then, and he will fold his hands on the book, and we shall talk about imagination, 'its joys, its griefs, its sickness, its health,' till one of the hundred and odd clocks on the walls of the back shop tells us that the lesson has lasted two hours instead of one. Then I shall have to quarrel with him about not taking my usual fee, the half-crown that always lies ready, neatly folded up in paper, in the broken Sèvres china tea-cup on the chimney-piece, and that he generally slips into my hand as I take leave, with a look of deferential apology that will some day, I am afraid, oblige me to kiss him. I should have done it before now if he did not take snuff and eat onion porridge for supper always just before I come in."

"To think of old David Macvie being the only intimate friend we have made, out of this house, during our year in London! Aunt Fletcher would have spared some of her warnings if she could have foreseen how little dangerous our acquaintance would be. We might just as well have stumbled upon him, his old clocks and watches, his cases of butterflies, and his semi-scientific, semi-mystical talk in a little shop in a back street in Chester."

"But I should not have given him French lessons at half-a-crown an hour, if we had found him when we were living with Aunt Fletcher; and, above all, he would not, under those circumstances, have led us into the one adventure that Aunt Fletcher could reasonably profess to be horrified at, that has befallen us since we came here. I mean our going with him to that meeting, and

your getting up to speak. It was all over in such a few minutes that I can still hardly believe it happened; but I did admire your courage, Katherine."

"I felt so like a hypocrite while sitting still," said Katherine, thoughtfully. "It made all my professions unreal, if when the occasion came and I found myself among people who seemed to be seeking after remedies for evils of which I thought I knew the cures, and seeking them in a wrong direction, I could not get up simply and tell them what I thought. I was not courageous, for I had no idea that what I said would rouse such opposition and dislike."

"Had not you! I knew it by instinct. I could not look round on the faces about us without being sure that the kind of things you would say would surely give offence. I felt it in the air."

"And generally I know so much more of what is going on than you do."

"Ah, yes; but you see it has two sides to it, this imagination, as David and I shall prove by a thousand instances to each other directly. 'It arrests the exercise of the senses, and again it gives them an artificial power.' One never can tell how it will serve one, 'its riches, its poverty.' However, there was one man in the room who understood you. I saw that before he got up to speak, and how well he spoke, like a regular trained orator; and what a pleasant winning face and manner his was. David thinks that between you, you and he, you made an impression on the meeting; and if you had not spoken he would never have taken up the cudgels in your defence."

"A curious momentary partnership of two unknown people who found themselves thinking alike in an adverse crowd. I think these flashes of sympathy do one good; if there are only points here and there to catch the electric light it will travel on, and their being far apart does not so much signify. I am glad David thinks I did no harm."

"He simply glories in you; but I doubt if you have not fallen in someone else's esteem in the exact proportion in which you have risen in his. I put Emmie West on to telling the tale to old Mrs. Urquhart this morning,

just from my goodnatured impulse to let everybody have plums to their taste, and is not she enjoying the delight of passing on the scandal to the Gresham Lecturer this instant? What a pity it is that we are not *clairvoyantes*, and cannot see and hear. I really think it will be worth a free admission to the lectures for you. Mrs. Urquhart will look upon it as a shield to secure her son's heart against the possibility of damage from you for ever afterwards, and she will withdraw her objections to his taking you under his professional wing, and fighting some of your battles for you, as I really think he is half disposed to do."

"Poor old lady; she would be much happier if she could set her fears at rest, and give her benevolence free play. Coming upstairs after you to-night, I caught sight of her face as we passed her open door in our wet cloaks, and the conflict on it was quite comic. She longed to ask us in to get warm by her fire till our own had burned up, but could not make up her mind to expose her son to the danger of intimacy with adventuresses like ourselves. If she only knew how safe he was, she would sleep better of nights."

"There, you are mistaken, Kitty; there, my imaginative insight carries me farther than yours. It would not at all conduce to Mrs. Urquhart's repose to believe that her son was quite safe from anyone's admiration; it would puzzle her so she would lie awake wondering what kind of a heart it was that could be indifferent to winning her treasure, and perhaps begin at last to lay schemes for conquering it. Think, Kitty, of your coming, some years hence, when you are over thirty, and have taken your doctor's diploma, to be courted by Mrs. Urquhart for her son! Shall we not feel that we have slain prejudice, and trampled our enemies under our feet, then?"

The sisters enjoyed a hearty laugh together at this notion; and then Katherine felt Christabel's skirts, and gave her leave to get up from before the fire, and prepare for their evening expedition to a house, a few streets distant, where they had each a lesson to give. They crept softly down the back stairs, not to remind Mr. West unnecessarily of the presence of lodgers in the

house; but as they passed the green-baize door, Katherine paused an instant, and drew Christabel's attention with a smile to the clatter of gay young voices that was going on within.

"If we had been members of a large family, and had had brothers," she said, as soon as they were out in the fog, and she had drawn Christabel's hand underneath her arm, "I wonder what difference it would have made in our destinies—whether we should have been strong enough to act independently of them, according to our own ideas, or whether we should have been hampered? Can you imagine the difference it would have made in our lives, at Aunt Fletcher's, if we had had a bright, energetic brother, like Harry West, coming to the house once or twice a year to make much of us? Which side would he have taken, when the great question of what we were to do with ourselves came up?"

"That would have depended on the sort of brain he had, and it is hardly likely that there should have been another in the family equal to yours, Kitty; probably he would have thought it incumbent on his manhood to side with Aunt Fletcher, and use all the power he would have had over us to condemn us to worsted work, mild visiting, and perpetual snubbing for all the vigorous years of our lives. I think we may be thankful that so little of the masculine element came into our lot. We found Aunt Fletcher hard enough to deal with, and she is only a woman like ourselves."

"Only a woman!" said Katherine, giving the little hand on her arm a squeeze against her heart. "What an admission from you! How pleased Aunt Fletcher would be if she could hear you saying that."

"And don't you think she would be pleased if she could see us to-night turning out in the wind and the rain at eight o'clock to make our way to a dingy old shop in a back street, where you will climb up three pairs of dirty stairs to give a lesson in mathematics to a presumptive young Jew, and I shall teach an old Scotch optician to read French badly at half-a-crown an hour? Only think, we might have been seated in a warm, well-lighted drawing-room at this moment, nursing Aunt Fletcher's two fat King Charleses in our laps, and with

nothing on earth to do but make conversation about the weather, and get snubbed for our pains. I say, Kitty, does not London mud smell sweet—and don't you breathe freely in the fog—and would not you like to jump lamp-post high for joy that we are safe in it?"

Christabel turned her head towards the lamp-post under which they were passing as she spoke, and its light fell for that instant on a sparkling, mischievous face, in which all the latent beauty was awake and looking out. The momentary illumination electrified two passers-by, who had chanced to be near enough to catch the last words, and who had turned with amused surprise to look at the speaker, but it was lost on Katherine, whose eyes were fixed on a distant spot in the badly-lighted street.

"Stay," she said, "is not that a woman's voice calling for help? The sound comes from that little group of people down there by the railway-bridge. I am afraid something is going on that ought not to be. Ah! again; yes, it is certainly a woman's voice calling for help."

"Let us hurry on and see if we can be of any use."

"If you were not here."

"Am I a Pharisee, pray, to pass by on the other side? Why, Kitty, what did we break away from the drawing-room atmosphere for, if not to protest against there being any such words as 'if you were not here' applied to ourselves to make us hindrances instead of helps when work is to be done? Let us hasten. I won't be made an 'if you were not here' to hinder you from acting."

They pressed forward towards a corner of the road where the arch of a railway-bridge cast a shadow so deep as to swallow up the red glare from the windows of a gin-shop in its neighbourhood. A group of two or three were hanging about in the shade, but no crowd had gathered as yet; drunken rows on that spot were occurrences of too ordinary a nature to attract much notice, and as the sisters left the pavement they could distinguish a pair standing close together, at whom the stragglers were idly staring. A ragged, hatless man, holding a woman fiercely by the shoulder, and pressing her up against the wall of the bridge where the shadow was deepest.

"He has struck her again; he's a desperate bad 'un,

he is," one of the lookers-on was saying to another, in a half-indifferent, half-frightened voice, as Katherine passed between them. She did not pause to ask any questions, but, pushing her way through the bystanders, walked straight up to the scene of action and laid her white gloveless hand on the ruffian's arm. She was shabbily enough dressed not to attract much attention among such bystanders as these, even when taking the unusual course of interfering between a drunken ruffian and a woman whom he had presumably the right to ill-use. She was putting herself in danger of life or limb, no doubt, but then, perhaps she was a Bible-woman, whose business it was, or somebody queer who had better be left to her own devices.

The Don Quixotes of the present day have at least the advantage of not attracting so much attention as their prototype, for however extravagant their enterprises may be, they keep as much as possible to ordinary appearances, and do not arm themselves for their frays so much as with a dented copper shield, or a lame Rosinante to lift them above the heads of the crowd.

CHAPTER V.

A SUDDEN SMILE.

For ever, Fortune, wilt thou prove
An unrelenting foe to Love,
And when we meet a mutual heart.
Come in between and bid us part.

LONDON in November ought to be peopled with lovers, for there is nothing that can make a person really indifferent to the depressing effect of an atmosphere of condensed gloom but the carrying about with him the curious exaltation of brain and happy or unhappy unrest of heart which belong exclusively to the condition commonly called being in love. It may be agony, or it may be ecstasy, but it is a specific against caring for the weather all the same. Wynyard Anstice reaped the benefit of this immunity the day after his interview with Alma, and went about his business in the fog and rain with such perfect unconsciousness of the state of the atmosphere that it was well

nothing better was wasted upon him. He was not exactly preoccupied, he went through his day's work just as usual, took notes of an intricate case in a law-court with even greater apprehension of the bearing of the evidence than ordinarily came to him; chatted with some friends, and threw out suggestions for an article in a journal to which he and they contributed, with more than his usual vivacity and readiness. No one who came near him had the slightest reason to complain of absence of mind in him, but they would have been very much surprised if they could have looked through the surface thoughts and words, which all matched quite well with the things they were busied about, to the under consciousness that lay beneath, and in some strange way vivified and glorified all. He would have been astonished himself, for this consciousness of Alma which accompanied him all day, wiping out the fog from the sky and filling noisy law-courts and dusty newspaper offices with a curious vividness of life and interest not naturally belonging to them, was something too airy to be put into words, or even into those full-born thoughts already half-clothed with words, which throng the outer courts of the mind. It made itself known through the busy hours only as a luminous presence waiting outside a secret door of the soul, to be let in by-and-by, and meanwhile illuminating the whole house by the rays that streamed through the chinks and fell everywhere.

There was a little impatience, perhaps, as the day wore on, for the hour to come when the secret door might be opened, yet when at length Wynyard had parted from his last client and was on his way home, a strange reluctance to enter upon the pleasure he had been promising himself all day came over him. Through his cold, rainy walk to his chambers he kept himself warm, not by thinking on the subject that had been keeping his heart beating to a quicker tune all day, but by planning how he would soon allow himself to begin to think about it. How by-and-by, when he was quite alone, he would open that door in his memory and let Alma come through, and again hear her say every word she had said last night, and see for an instant the quick rain of tears veil the dearest and loveliest face in the world, and feel over

again the strong pain and joy the shock of that sight had given him: yes, and find out all the meaning there was in it, and count all the good reasons for continuing to love her that might be wrung out of her kind looks and her indifferent words, and the warm, true tears that could only have sprung from a loving woman's heart. Perhaps it was that part of the prospect which had sown the seeds of reluctance amid his eagerness; a little cold dread threatened to kill all his delight, lest a second, or a third, or a thousandth's going over of what had passed should point to the conclusion that nothing new had happened, and that Alma's looks and words and display of feeling had nothing essentially different in them from what he had seen often, and as often been disappointed in, when the immediate charm of presence had been removed by a little space of time. Never mind, last evening had at all events been a turning-point; he had resolved to hope, and his determination should remain, however little he could justify it to his reason. Had he not been experiencing all day what a difference to his daily drudging this permission to hope made? The question brought him to the door of his abode and occupied his thoughts while he shook the wet from his umbrella and mounted two flights of stairs to the floor where his chambers lay. He was a popular man, whose friendships and acquaintances branched up and down into various grades of society, and he had had quite a fight to evade invitations that would have given him the choice of several oddly different occupations for his evening. He almost felt as if he had broken away from all his acquaintance to keep an appointment with Alma, and that when he entered his room he should find her seated in one of his two armchairs by the fire, ready to talk to him. His first glance round the place brought a startling half-realisation of his fancy. The gas was burning brightly. the table was spread, with signs of someone having lately made a meal there, and the most comfortable of the armchairs was wheeled just in front of the fire, with its back to the door, so that nothing was seen of its occupant but a head of light hair above its high back. Wynyard stood staring for a minute like a person in a dream, and then burst out laughing, while a young man leisurely

picked himself up from the depths of the chair, where he had ensconced himself, and came forward, showing a face and figure that had just so much likeness to Wynyard's as would have made a stranger set him down at first sight for a younger brother.

"You expected to see me, old fellow, didn't you?" he said, holding out his hand.

"When I perceived that someone had eaten up my dinner, of course I did. The empty table was enough to make me think of you, as it used at Eton when I came in from cricket and found all my bread and butter devoured; I knew you had been there."

"Well, I had nothing else to do, and I was hungry; so when your old Mrs. Gamp looked in and began to poke about, I told her I thought she had better bring in the dinner at once, and I'd keep it hot for you."

"Which you appear to have done admirably in old Eton fashion."

"Not so bad; there is a bit of juicy steak and a hot potato down by the fire, and I sent out for a second pot of porter, which you'd never have thought of doing for me."

"You would always have taken care of yourself first."

"Come, now, don't be crusty, and make a fellow out to be more selfish than he knows he is. Sit still, if you are tired, and I'll fag for you; it won't be the first time by a hundred. You shall have your dinner before you in a minute, hot, and a steak that is worth eating, I can tell you; a great deal better than anything I ever get now."

"Except when you steal it, you deeply-to-be-pitied martyr to State dinners."

"Well, sit down; I've a lot of things to tell you that you'll like to hear; but get your dinner first, and then we'll talk. I don't believe you have half such a tiring life after all as mine. You look as fresh as possible, and when I got here after hunting about after you all day I was so done up, with the beastly weather and all, that if it had not been for the beefsteak and porter coming handy, you might have found a corpse on the hearthrug, and had to stand a trial for conspiring with Sairey Gamp to murder your cousin. To hear of my demise, by the way, would be nuts to somebody in Eccleston Square, and

lead up—in how short a time, I wonder?—to another wedding-breakfast there.”

“I dislike that kind of nonsense,” said Wynyard, so sharply that Lord Anstice, who was lifting the hot dish from before the fire, put it down again with a clatter, to shrug his shoulders.

“So bad as that, is it?” he exclaimed. “Well, I am warned; I won’t approach that topic again, unless with a face a yard long. But there, now, eat; and if that steak don’t put you into a good enough humour to talk about anything, I should say your case was a very serious one indeed.”

While Wynyard eat his dinner his companion half-turned his chair from the fire, and with his legs thrown commodiously over one arm, sat sideways, watching him with a lazy, good-humoured sort of interest in the meal, such as a child shows who finds relief from the trouble of entertaining himself by watching his elders, and feels rather honoured in being allowed to do so.

The likeness between the cousins, though most apparent at first sight, remained strong even in the opinion of those friends who knew every change of the two countenances. In fact the constant pleasant variety of expression was the point their faces had most markedly in common, and it required a careful student of face-lore to detect the different qualities of the smiles and quick looks of intelligence and sudden glooms of annoyance or pain that made each countenance like an open landscape on a day of cloud and sunshine. A changeful show, very agreeable to look upon. It was easier to see that the younger face was the handsomer of the two, being in fact singularly handsome, and to overlook that what it gained in symmetry of feature it lost in moral strength and intellectual power. Just at that moment the look of listless discontent which usually lurked about the well-shaped mouth and drooping thick-fringed eyelids was absent, but the tone of voice in which the younger man’s next remark was made showed an approaching relapse into the prevailing mood.

“I should say you lead a very jolly sort of life here by yourself, with very little to trouble or bother you.”

“Except my work,” answered Wynyard dryly, “which,

if I remember right, you considered something of a trouble when you attempted it."

"Attempted it, precisely; but then I never did it; I never got any work to do, and I could not have done it if I had. I was not saying that I should lead a jolly sort of life here, but that you do."

"Never mind me; let me alone. How about yourself? I have hardly seen you since you were last at Leigh. What made you come back so suddenly? was your mother there? or what happened? Let us turn to the fire; I have nothing very particular to do this evening, so you can talk as much as you like."

"Good heavens! may I? What a gracious permission! I ought to be hugely obliged to you for condescending to listen to me."

Wynyard thought he was partly right there, but he only said: "I thought you intended to stay at Leigh till after Christmas?"

"Intended? No; you said I ought; but I never intended anything but to be governed by circumstances, as I always am. You were right just now about my mother being there; she was there, with all her friends."

"Well, I suppose you consider the house your mother's home as much as yours?"

"'Ministers to make one die'—that was a capital speech of Florac's in 'The Newcomes.' It made more impression on me than anything else in the book; puts all my life experiences into a nutshell. They were all there, every one of them, men and women."

"If you were oftener at home, your mother would take more pains to suit her society to your taste, I should think. When you leave her alone of course she gets her old friends about her."

"Come, now, Wynyard, did she ever think of my tastes in her life, except to try to crush them out as if they were serpents? Does she not consider it her first duty in life to bully me? and would hot ploughshares strewn in the way keep her from it? You know you never could stand her for more than ten days in the old times. After the first week or so of the holidays you used to sneak off to the Rivers's or somewhere, and leave me to bear the brunt of the lecturing alone."

"She was not my mother," said Wynyard, quickly. "However, what are we talking about? You don't wish me to condole with you on your mother's temper, I suppose. She is about the only relation you have in the world except myself; and she did the best she could for you when you were dependent on her."

"And now that she is dependent on me, you fancy, I suppose, that I find it easier to get on?"

"No," said Wynyard, with the first pleasant smile that had crossed his face since the talk began; "I know you both too well to fancy any such thing. I am certain that her conscience does not allow her to abate her vigilance over your shortcomings by a hair's-breadth, because she is now owing everything to you; and as for you, I won't say what quality it is in you that makes you a greater sneak than ever under the circumstances, but I am prepared to give up all hope of ever seeing you stand up to her as you ought, now that you have a house of your own, which you could turn her out of if you pleased."

"Then you ought to leave off bullying me when I turn myself out of the house; you know it's hammer-and-tongs when we are there together, and that I always hated it. When I think of the old Eton holidays in that awful little house in Chelsea, and the state I used to be in at the end of them, I wonder I am alive now. It's only natural I should want a year or two of peace and quiet to shake myself together again. Why should you object?"

"I don't object; I only say the sort of aimless life you are leading now is very bad for you, and it's for you to consider whether you ain't getting sick of it."

"What's the good of considering? I don't see anything else to be done—unless—yes, I had a scheme in my head, but for that you must help me; and though it's for your own good as well as mine I declare I don't know how to put it to you."

"I don't advise you to bring me into any of your plans; it would not answer. You've got to learn to look after yourself, and if you can't, why should not you marry?"

"That's the worst piece of advice you ever gave me. It would be a beastly selfish, and a monstrously silly.

thing to do. If I chose a wife to please myself and brought her home, there would be two people instead of one for my mother to bully; and if I let my mother choose for me one of her sort, there would be two people instead of one to bully me. It's out of the question. I want peace and quiet and something to amuse me, and you suggest getting married! I ain't so hard-hearted as all that. Fancy bringing a little frightened thing like the bride I saw yesterday to Leigh for my mother to sit upon!"

"There are plenty of girls as lovely and timid-looking as that one, who would be quite ready and thankful to attempt the adventure if you put it to them, I fancy," said Wynyard, rather bitterly. "By all accounts Lady Forrest has not been wanting in courage."

"Ah! but there it's the man himself that has the temper, or drinks, or something, is it not? and that's nothing—nothing to a nagging mother-in-law. A woman can always get the whip-hand of a man if she likes, and all the better for beginning by seeming afraid of him. So they say at least—I don't know. No mortal being ever even pretended to be afraid of me. I'm not made for ruling, I suppose. It is a dreadful mistake that you are not in my place, Wynyard, and that brings me to what I came here to talk about. I have been thinking of it ever since yesterday."

"I should have thought that was too old a story to be talked or thought about now; and, for myself, I don't see the use of it."

"You will by-and-by, when I have got what I came to say right side up in my head, and can put it properly to you."

There was a little pause, during which Wynyard took out his note-book and began to study it, and Lord Anstice folded and unfolded a stray sheet of foolscap into various shapes, with great appearance of interest. After finally producing a cocked-hat and sticking it on to a bust of Dante on the chimneypiece, he resumed, in a meditative tone:

"No, I can't understand her passing for a beauty. She looked well yesterday, extremely well; but I never could get over her nose. A woman with a nose like that

has always too much to say for herself. I suppose you don't mind it, eh?"

Wynyard, who had now taken up a pencil, proceeded to re-write an obscure note, with an expression of face which he intended to make utterly indifferent and pre-occupied, but he could not prevent his features from quivering a little.

"Why don't you answer a fellow?"

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"Oh yes, you do. I was asking you whether you did not think Miss Rivers about as equal a match to my mother as one could expect to meet with in this generation. Those delicate aquiline noses and bright blue eyes, with a spice of devil in them, mean temper, don't they? and plenty to say for yourself. Altogether, a person who would not consent to be sat upon easily, eh?"

Wynyard returned his note-book and pencil to his pocket and sprang up from his chair.

"I'm going out," he began; "if you've exhausted all you have to say to me, and have nothing better to do than discuss Miss Rivers's nose, which is no business of yours or mine, let me remark, I shall leave you. I have just come across the address of an old fellow, whose acquaintance I made accidentally at a public meeting, and whom I promised to look up some day. I've a fancy to find him out to-night."

"That's to say, that any old fellow is better worth listening to than your own cousin, though he has come out on a wretched evening to talk to you about your own affairs."

"I have not heard anything about them yet; but you can come with me if you like."

"I'm coming, of course; I like your oddities, and when I've got you out in the streets, you won't be able to get away from me till I've had my say out."

"That depends," Wynyard observed when they were out in the air, and walking down the wet street arm-in-arm. "I may as well tell you at once that I'm not in a humour to-night for chaff on the subject you introduced just now. Anything else you please; I don't want to be crusty, but that is tabooed now and for ever, unless you wish really to annoy me."

"There is nothing I mean less. It was not chaff either I was beginning upon. I had a handful of good wheat to show you, if you'd only have looked at it. Now, I suppose, I shall have to come round you with the halter some other way."

"If you really have anything to say—say it out. It can't possibly concern Miss Rivers."

"But it does. However, I've turned round now, and am beginning at the other end. What should you say to my cutting Leigh for a few years, and setting forth on my own hook, without letting anyone know precisely where I was going, and without knowing any better myself? A life of travel and adventure is positively the only sort of life I care a rap for; and why should not I have it? I should take plenty of money with me, and while it lasted, live about as I pleased in out-of-the-way places—Timbuctoo, perhaps—without any of my people being a bit the wiser; and when I came back, say in ten or fourteen years—who knows?—I might be ready to settle down and marry the woman my mother has in her eye for me already, and make up to her for all the years wherein I have plagued her, by walking in her ways for the rest of my life. You may not credit it, but I have such a praiseworthy ending always in view, and nothing will bring me to it but a long spell of freedom first. What do you say?"

"Say! there's nothing to be said; but that it's as foolish and selfish a plan as you could possibly propose to yourself. You know perfectly well that your mother would be miserable, and that you've no right to throw responsibilities on her that she's even more unfit to deal with than you are yourself. You don't expect me to further such a project, I hope?"

"Wait a bit before you begin to swear at me. Just suppose for an instant or two that I'm dead."

"What's the use of that?"

"You'll see—say I'm dead, and that you immediately marry Miss Rivers: what would happen next? You would not, I take it, turn my mother out of Leigh, since she has taken to the place; or stop her from carrying out her favourite plans in the village, seeing that they are about all she cares for in life at present. She would

be dependent on you instead of on me, and your wife would manage her. That's the point. The thing opened out to me as I sat looking at Miss Rivers's profile the day before yesterday, and I've been thinking about it ever since."

"You don't mean to drown yourself on the uncertain prospect of getting Miss Rivers to manage your mother, I suppose?"

"Not at all. I go away for a few years, leaving the entire management of my affairs in your hands. You have sufficient clue to my whereabouts to send me money, but you decline to give such information to my mother or any of her allies as would set them on following and remonstrating with me. It's an understood thing among all parties that my eventual return and my future conformability depend on my taking a long spell of let-alone first; and meanwhile you marry Miss Rivers and do pretty much what you like at Leigh. You might try on any of your pet social schemes you pleased on the estate for anything I should care. Shut up all the alehouses, or give all the women votes if you can. I'd promise not to undo more than I could help when I got home again. How do you think it would work?"

"Like a good many of your plans, agreeably enough, perhaps, for yourself and very badly for everybody else concerned. What makes you suppose that I should be willing to give up my profession, and all my prospects in life, to do your work while you enjoyed yourself?"

"Well, I could tell you in a word why you should, if you will let me. Miss——"

"No, don't go on," interrupted Wynyard hastily. "It's absurd. If I can't put myself in a position to win the wife I want, by following my own line, I certainly shall not do it by becoming a paid servant of yours. You misunderstand the matter altogether."

"But don't be crusty. Servant is a notion of your own. Of course I meant a sort of partnership, of which you should settle the terms yourself, and that could go on all the same after I came back again to England. Leigh is large enough for a colony of us, and dull enough to want plenty of inhabitants to make it bearable."

"Thank you—you mean well, I dare say; but plans of that kind never answer, and I am the last person——"

"You ought to be the first person, if you put the smallest atom of faith in your own theories. I've heard you talk by the hour as if all private property was a mistake and everybody who has anything ought always to be giving it away to everybody else, and doing everybody's work as well as his own; and now, when a chance comes of carrying out your doctrine, and a fellow asks you to take the work he can't do himself off his shoulders, and go shares with all that he has, you say, 'It won't answer,' as coolly as if you had never preached it up as the right thing."

"Don't push me against the lamp-post in your vehemence. Look where you are going—you will have your umbrella hooked on to that woman's bonnet in a minute."

The woman was Katherine Moore; and as Wynyard pulled his companion farther on to the pavement, and slackened his pace to lower the obstructive umbrella, the sisters, talking eagerly, passed him closely on the lamp side, and Christabel's remark about the pleasantness of a London fog, and her upward glance at the light, arrested the attention of the two young men at the same moment. They did not speak, but they exchanged glances, first of amusement, then of surprise, when the face, whose sudden beauty the lamplight had revealed, had been swallowed up again in the murky gloom of the street.

"Queer things one hears in the streets sometimes," said Lord Anstice meditatively, after they had proceeded a step or two on their way. "I wonder what the girl meant by saying that London mud was sweet? I wish I could see her again and ask her. She looked as if she meant something more than met the ear, and I shan't get her saying out of my head in a hurry; it was such a queer thing to hear in the street on a foggy day. Hallo! What's that?"

"Not a queer thing to hear in these streets," said Wynyard; "some drunken row probably before the gin-shop at the corner. Here is our turning."

"But the girl who passed us just now went that way. I saw her pressing on as if she had business down there. Let's follow at all events to see what's up."

Wynyard, who had had a good deal of previous experience of the general inutility of interference in street

rows; did not second his companion's desire to push on with the same eagerness that Katherine and Christabel had displayed. Consequently the two young men did not reach the scene of action till a few minutes after the appearance of the sisters there, and as a rough crowd had now poured out of the gin-shop near, they had some difficulty in forcing their way through to what seemed the core of interest—a clear space, close to the railway-arch, where four figures, disengaged from the throng, were standing out conspicuously; a woman leaning against the brickwork of the arch, wiping some blood from her face with the corner of a ragged shawl, and a man, who seemed lately to have turned from her towards two other women standing before him, one of whom had her hand on his arm. His face, on which such light as there was fell, wore an uncertain look, half-bewildered, half-savage, as of a person arrested in a moment of fierce passion, and held irresolute by some strange new experience, which had not as yet translated itself into his consciousness as a cause for putting aside or inflaming his rage. The woman who was touching him, and on whose face his strained, bloodshot eyes were fixed, was still speaking, for a clear, refined voice was audible a few paces off through the hubbub of the crowd; but just as the two young men gained the outer circle of spectators someone in the throng laughed—a shrill, jeering woman's laugh. At the sound the arrested madness in the ruffian's face lighted up again like a jet of fire bursting forth, and as the evil flame leaped from his eyes, there came the dull sound of a heavy blow followed by a fall, and then a shrill wailing cry rang through the street. Two minutes of indescribable confusion and backward and forward surging of the crowd followed; but at the end Wynyard and his cousin had each accomplished the object they had respectively thrown themselves upon, when the sound of that cowardly blow fired their pulses. Wynyard, aided by a wiry little old man who had elbowed his way to the front at the same moment with himself, had pinioned the offender against the wall of the bridge, and was holding him firmly there till the proper authorities, who were said to be making their appearance round the corner of the street, should arrive to take him into custody. Lord Anstice had succeeded, he never quite knew how, in

dragging up from under the feet of stupid starers and gesticulators the woman he had seen felled to the ground, and in carrying her out of the throng of people intent on watching Wynyard's prowess, to a spot just beyond the shadow of the railway-arch, where a coffee-stall with its lamp and awning seemed to offer a sort of shelter. Two or three women followed him, and almost the first thing of which he was distinctly aware was the touch of a cold, trembling hand laid on his, and a voice, hoarse, but imperious, saying in his ear :

"Give her to me—here, into my arms. She is my sister."

"Can you hold her? She has fainted!" he said, looking down into a small white agonised face in which he did not at the moment recognise the flashing-eyed smiling countenance he had noticed under the lamp a few minutes before.

"Of course I can ; she is my sister I tell you. She will open her eyes when she feels me. Oh, Kitty! Kitty!"

A woman pushed the coffee-seller's chair forward and drew Christabel into it ; and then Lord Anstice knelt down on the pavement, utterly regardless of wet and bystanders, and laid his burden across her knees. Neither he nor Christabel had presence of mind to think of any other course to take than this. They were both absorbed in one question, so dreadful to Christabel that it might not have suggested itself to her if she had not read it in his eyes. What was the meaning of the death-like whiteness of the face, which fell prone on Christabel's shoulder as soon as Lord Anstice's supporting arm was withdrawn ? Before he rose from his knees he had time to take in a good many particulars connected with the white face and drooping head, from which the bonnet, crushed into a shapeless mass, had fallen. Its high white brows, one of which was disfigured by a wound, the soft dusky hair brushed smoothly back from the face, the delicate ears, the sweeping black eyelashes and level eyebrows,—and he thought what a strange face it was to have grown death-like in a street row, and how still more incongruous with the surrounding scene—the flaring light of the coffee-seller's lamp and the flaunting and wretched figures gathered round—was the clear-cut cameo-like head that bent over it ; the features as pallid and almost as motionless,

but instinct with living agony instead of unconscious peace. He had time for these thoughts before any change came, and then there was a quivering of the white eyelids, a swelling of the nostrils, a moan from the recumbent head, and at the same moment the other face flushed up, and two earnest eyes, with a strange look of triumph in them, were lifted to his.

"There, you see, I said she would wake up as soon as she felt my arms round her; I knew she would come back to *me*. Katherine, Katherine, my darling, I am holding you fast!"

Another long-drawn sigh, and then the dark-fringed lids were fairly raised, and the eyes turned to the face above them with something of an answering look of love; and Lord Anstice, as he sprang to his feet ready for helpful action now that suspense was over, felt a curious pulse in his throat, and a quick bound of joyful relief in his heart, such as nothing that had occurred to himself for many a day had been able to give him. It was, to use his own phraseology, the "oddest" feeling he had known for a long time, and he quite applauded himself for being capable of such strong emotion. By this time Wynyard and his coadjutor had resigned their captive into the hands of the police, and they now joined the smaller group by the coffee-stall. The shabby old man, who, to Lord Anstice's secret disgust, recognised Christabel and called her "my dear," immediately took the lead in deciding what was to be done.

"These ladies are friends of mine," he explained to Wynyard, "and were coming to my house when the accident occurred. It is a few yards farther down the main road, in a side street: we had better get them there as quickly as we can, out of the way of the crowd that will soon be surging back to the gin-shop."

Katherine, who was now sufficiently recovered to take part in the discussion, caught at this suggestion and managed to drag herself from Christabel's arms and put her feet to the ground; but the first effort to move brought a moan of pain, and though she assured Christabel that she believed no bones were broken, she was obliged to let herself be supported by the arms of the numerous helpers who came forward, and was at last fairly carried

into the little shop. The jar of the last step across the threshold, and of being laid down on the hard sofa in the back parlour among the clocks, cost her another fainting-fit longer than the first, and while Christabel was occupied in applying restoratives, there was time for a few words of explanation to pass between the owner of the house and the two young men, whom alone of the crowd he had allowed to pass beyond the shop-door. As soon as he began to talk quietly, Wynyard recognised his acquaintance of the public meeting in the little old man, and he did not feel the less inclined to put him down as a social phenomenon for hearing him speak of Christabel as his teacher, and seeing her take from under her cloak a volume of Pascal, which was to have been the subject of their evening's study.

Surely there must be a spirit of travesty abroad to-night, and his long day's suppressed excitement had carried him into some region of illusion, where perhaps there was nothing incongruous in wiry old shopkeepers being the pupils of pale young ladies, or in women with grand pure faces like that one on the sofa being knocked down by drunken ruffians in street-rows. It did not increase, but rather lessened Wynyard's bewilderment, when Christabel, in answer to his question, gave the name of the street and the number of the house where they lived, and he remembered all at once that it was Mrs. West's address, and recalled Lady Rivers's embarrassed explanation about the two young ladies whom her sister, Mrs. West, had taken into her house as companions for her daughter, that pretty shy little Emmie West, whom he had met in Alma's company once or twice during the course of the last year. This information seemed rather the *mot de l'énigme*, so far as accounting for his own share in the events of the evening went, for now he knew why it was that, failing the quiet reverie he had promised himself, a stroll in the direction of Saville Street had appeared the next most agreeable thing. It brought him not near the Rose indeed, but near the earth that sometimes touched the Rose.

All through this evening's walk there had been lying at the bottom of his mind a plan of turning towards Saville Street, when his visit to the watchmaker was

over, and (if his courage held good at the last moment) of paying a late call on Mrs. West, and finding an excuse for drawing Emmie into talk about the wedding that would include one speaking and one hearing of Alma's name at least. The project was at all events so fixed in his mind, that when Dr. Urquhart had been summoned, and had decided that Miss Moore must be conveyed home before anything could be done to relieve her, it seemed quite a matter of necessity that he should follow and see the end of the adventure. He did not even feel surprised at the energy with which his cousin scouted Dr. Urquhart's demur to the necessity of so many attendants accompanying his patient to her own door. He was glad to be upheld by a perfectly indifferent person in his opinion, that something would arise as soon as they all reached Saville Street to make the household there glad of the presence of two willing messengers, who might be sent anywhere that occasion required.

As it turned out, Wynyard's presence really was a boon to Emmie and Mrs. West, for they found him sufficiently quick of comprehension to be used as a decoy for the purpose of drawing Mr. West's attention from the unusual bustle and confusion in the lodgers' part of the house. He allowed himself to be hastily sent into the dining-room, while Katherine's transfer from the carriage, through the hall, was being effected, and honestly taxed his conversational powers to the utmost, and kept Mr. West so well entertained that he quite forgot to harass the rest of the family by complaints and questions. After more than an hour's hard work, Wynyard had his reward. Mrs. West and Emmie came back to the room, and after a little talk over the accident, he found an opportunity for telling them that he had been present at Lady Forrest's wedding the day before. The remark started the sort of conversation he desired, talk that was always more or less hovering round Alma, and which at last brought out an expression of Mrs. West's preference for Alma over her sisters, and the relation of various anecdotes of her kindness to her Saville Street cousins. Wynyard (despising himself for his folly all the time) thought that the interest of these little stories, totally

irrelevant to him and his concerns as they were, well repaid him for the hour and a half he had spent in waiting for the chance of some such treat. He knew that they did not concern him in the least, and ought not to alter his thoughts in any way, for he believed that he understood Alma's character better than anyone else did. Yet as he sat and listened, while the foolish little anecdotes fell in diffuse sentences from Mrs. West's lips, he could not help receiving them into his mind as a brightly-coloured hazy background, prepared for him to begin painting hopeful pictures upon as soon as he should be alone at last. Emmie, seated on the edge of the sofa, and putting in a word now and again, entered into his thoughts only as a pretty incident in a scene that would always live in his memory with a certain pleasurable glow upon it. He had been so well amused himself that it did not occur to him to feel surprised at the sight of his cousin still lingering in the hall, when at last unmistakable signs of weariness in the master of the house had driven him to take leave.

"What did you find to do? and where have you put yourself these two hours?" he asked, when they were on their way home, and had settled preliminaries about meeting next day to offer their evidence of the assault they had witnessed.

Lord Anstice launched into a description of the Moores' rooms, to which he had been invited by one of the children, under an idea that he was the attendant of the surgeon whom Dr. Urquhart had summoned to his assistance. He made a long and amusing story out of his encounters with different members of the crowded Saville Street household, not omitting to describe Emmie's shy beauty and old Mrs. Urquhart's wonderful evening-cap; but he said very little about the real heroines of the evening, and nothing at all concerning a few words of conversation between himself and Christabel, which, though he might not perhaps have confessed it even to himself, had repaid him for a good deal of unusual self-denial.

The opportunity for talk had fallen out in this way. He was standing where he had been left by Casabianca, in the corner of the Moores' sitting-room, partly hidden

by Christabel's easel, while the two medical men talked together by the fireplace, when Christabel came out from an inner room in which Katherine was, and walking straight up to him, touched him on the arm.

"My sister wishes to speak to you before you leave the house."

"Is she able?"

"She will not sleep till her wish is satisfied; follow me before we are forbidden," with a glance at Dr. Urquhart and a movement towards the bedroom. Lord Anstice followed her. Katherine was lying on a low bed, that fitted into a slope of the attic-roof, pale, but with full consciousness and energy in the grey eyes she turned on him.

"I want to ask one question before I sleep," she said, in a weak sweet voice. "You were there?—you saw it all, did you not?—you are——"

"Ralph Anstice," he said, seeing that she paused and looked earnestly at him.

"I was wondering whether it was you whom I saw in the crowd. You came first to our help—I think you must have seen——"

"The blow that struck you down. I did, and you may be quite sure that the ruffian who dealt it shall get his deserts as far as I can accomplish it."

"Hush! I was not thinking of him. I want to know what became of the woman whom he had struck before I came up. Did no one think about her? Did no one notice what became of her?"

"I can't say that I did. She followed the crowd, I suppose."

"But she seemed much hurt; she is a woman, you see, as well as I, and much more helpless."

"At all events she shall be free from her tyrant for a pretty long time to come. I think I may safely promise you that."

"But it may not be enough; it may not even be the best thing for her, if the man is her husband. I want you to understand that I interfered for her protection, and it is her good, not any foolish indignation on my account, that I want all of you who saw what happened to bear in mind, if you are called upon to give evidence to-morrow. Do not make what happened to me the

important point. I brought it on myself, and I shall feel guilty if things are made worse for that miserable woman on my account. I can trust David Macvie, and you—may I not?—to consider her welfare first, and not press the charge on my behalf, if prolonged punishment of the man would be bad for her.”

There was a moment's silence, while Lord Anstice hesitated in some embarrassment at the request; and Christabel, who had gone round to the other side of the bed, and was bending over Katherine, looked up at him.

“You had better do as my sister bids you,” she said. “She is always right, I can assure you, and the sort of person to be obeyed.”

As she spoke a sudden smile broke just for an instant over her face, bringing colour and light and sweetness upon it, and a look into the wonderful wide blue eyes that made them seem to his fancy like gateways, giving a glimpse into a new world, where such feelings as ennui, and weariness, and unprofitableness had no existence. In that moment he recognised the face to be the same as the one that had flashed upon him in the street, and struck him so much by its strange beauty.

When he had left Wynyard at his door, and was proceeding on his solitary way to his own quarters, he occupied himself in wondering how one small pale face could wear such opposite looks, and which of those he knew, he should find upon it when he came to Saville Street again, as of course he must, to render an account of how he had kept his promise.

CHAPTER VI.

PROS AND CONS.

But busy, busy, still art thou,
To bind the loveless, joyless vow,
The heart from pleasure to delude
To join the gentle to the rude.

“So you saw Agatha when you were in Paris, and never wrote me word. How was that, Constance?”

“Speak lower, dear Alma, my maid is in the next room putting away all my bridal dresses, and the door is open.”

And young Lady Forrest, the bride of six weeks ago, looking very unbride-like in the deep mourning she had lately put on for her mother-in-law, whose sudden death had cut short the wedding journey, looked timidly towards a figure dimly seen through the open dressing-room door and then appealingly at Alma.

"Now, Constance, I hope you are not going to set up a fear of your servants in addition to all your other little terrors," said Alma. "I did look, at all events, to seeing some dignity and independence come with the consciousness of your wedding-ring. Do you ever mean to feel as if you were mistress of this house, I wonder?"

Constance answered by another frightened "Hush!" and Alma, after crossing the room and closing the door, knelt down by her sister's chair and put her arms round her.

"Now we are thoroughly alone at last," she said coaxingly. "I see it won't often be so. Let us *feel* alone this once, and speak one or two free words to each other once more in our lives. I have scolded mamma for wanting to make you talk, and here I am doing it myself; but I am so hungry for a little bit of your real self, Connie. We have not talked together in our old way since the day, three months ago now, when you came into my room and said: 'I am engaged to Sir John Forrest.' I was naughty, and you were frightened, and a thin ice wall grew up between us. It has passed away now, has it not? and you will at least let me look into your eyes, if you can't speak to me, and I shall read there how it is with you, now that you have six weeks' experience of what it is to be married."

"Of course, since Lady Forrest's death it is all very sad, so different from what we expected," Constance answered, still avoiding her sister's gaze.

"Yes; but that need not keep you from looking at me. The suddenness was very shocking, and it must have been sad for you both, hurrying home to find that all was over. But now that it is all over, let us speak the truth to each other about it. Lady Forrest was a very formal person, whom neither you nor I could get on with, and—I suppose it was very hard-hearted of me—but my first thought, when I heard she was dead, was that now there was one person less for you to be afraid of."

"I had been making up my mind not to be afraid of her, but to try to get her to like me. I thought she might be a help to me; show me how to manage; give me hints when I felt at a loss, as I do sometimes."

"I should have been frightfully jealous in that case. Yes, indeed, I don't mean to give you up to anyone. You will have to confide in me still in the old schoolroom fashion. I will not allow that the mere fact of your being married has put such a gulf between us that we cannot be as useful to each other as we used to be. Now I challenge you to look me full in the face and say that you can do without me, and that you don't, just now, long to talk to me without any false pretences."

At last Lady Forrest did lift her drooping eyelids far enough to give Alma a good look into her lovely eyes.

"You don't want me to say whether I am happy or not, do you?" she asked, with a visible shrinking from the question. "You know it is very difficult, while everything is still so strange, to know exactly how it is with one; but (lowering her voice to a still softer whisper) I don't mind telling you, if this is what you want to know, that *he* is really very fond of me, in his way, he is indeed, Alma."

"What a singular he," cried Alma lightly, to conceal the pain the earnest look she had courted had given her. "But, my dear child, do you always call Sir John *he* in that awe-struck tone? Does he by chance belong to a tribe of savages I read of the other day, where a wife is not allowed, on pain of death, to speak her husband's name? It is considered a sort of sacrilege, I believe, among them, for a woman even to think of the man she belongs to by any other designation than master. Has he brought you to that faith already?"

"I wish you would not joke about it."

"Is it really so dreadful then? Nay, you must give me another look; you must not send me away from our private interview with such very fearful ideas of your present condition. Remember you are the first of us three sisters who has made the desperate plunge, and if you report badly of the new country, how am I ever to get across?"

"Oh Alma, indeed I have not said anything; I am

quite content and convinced that I have done the right thing. Please don't go away and say or think that—in fact—that I don't feel as all girls do when they are first married, unless they have been merely silly and selfish, as mamma calls it; and have chosen to please their own fancy. I did my duty, and I feel sure that I shall be more and more satisfied with everything around me as time goes on."

"We'll get to the *thing* part of it when mamma is here; while this precious hour to ourselves lasts, let us cast one more glance at the *he*, to satisfy my devouring anxiety. You are not going to be very much afraid of your husband, are you, you little coward? You say he is fond of you, and you used to know, with all your softness, how to weave a very pretty little tyranny out of your fears for anyone who cared enough about you to submit to it. The *caring* is the great point with you—is it not?—not so much *who cares*. Having got that, you will do very well, I should think, and grow happy and at ease with your husband. Shall you not?"

There was a pause, and then Constance said slowly:

"There are different ways of caring. A person may care for you to look and be exactly what *he* wishes, every minute of the day. That may be all his pleasure in you. He may not be able to have an idea that you ever want to be or do anything for yourself. It is pleasant to be of so much consequence, but it is anxious work. One always has to be watching oneself, and trifles grow to be so terribly important."

"Yes, I see. In marriage it ought to be one thing or the other. If the two are not *really* one, they had better be two. The artificial way you are trying, where on one side it is all acting, must make a dreadful burden of life."

"But one will get used to it in time," said Constance, more cheerfully. "One may get to know so well what is expected of one in every little thing as never to make mistakes. That was why I began to reckon a great deal on seeing poor old Lady Forrest again. She had lived with him all his life, and must thoroughly have known all his little ways."

"Little ways!" Alma burst out. "Fads, I suppose,

about the shape of your boots, and the set of your dress, and the phrases in which you speak of the weather. Oh Constance! to be anxious about such matters as that all one's life must indeed be a burden. Forgive me, dear! You know my way; I speak impetuously, and then it is over, and I am prudent forever afterwards. I promise never to try to make you discontented again."

A shade of pained displeasure had come into Lady Forrest's face; and Alma, feeling that her outburst had closed the gates of confidence, for that hour at least, hastened penitently to turn the conversation to more commonplace matters, where she should not be tempted to offend again.

"I can't help being glad," she said, "in spite of your regrets for old Lady Forrest, that you will begin your reign in this house as sole mistress. You will be able to carry out your own plans and tastes; and how mamma will enjoy helping you to remodel the antiquated furniture, and make the place homelike for yourself! Everybody allows that her judgment is good in such things, and I know you will enjoy giving her the pleasure of thinking she is helping you."

"Don't put such a notion into mamma's head, Alma, it would cause me dreadful trouble. Sir John hates changes, and I am afraid, more than anything else, hates mamma's taste. We must never let her know this; but he calls it, and some other things that you and I have been taught to believe in, vulgar. I hardly like to say it, but it's true, and he does not mind letting me know now what he thinks of us all. You can't imagine the relief it is to me to put away my *trousseau*, and remember that when our mourning is over I can get fresh clothes from people he approves, whose taste he won't question on every point."

"All your pretty things that we chose together, and that poor mamma fussed over to such an extent, are you actually burying them all?"

The tears rushed to Lady Forrest's eyes, and she turned her head away to hide them as she answered:

"You don't know how tiresome it was to be told half-a-dozen times every day that there was something a little wrong in what I had on. I see you think I ought to have

stood up for mamma's taste and yours, but it is very difficult to go on for ever answering the same sort of objections to every trifle about one—over and over again."

"I should think so, indeed. But I can't help feeling sorry that all the little links between Constance Rivers and Constance Forrest are put away so quickly. You might as well have been Marie Antoinette, changing all her clothes, down to her stockings, before she was allowed to cross the frontier into her husband's kingdom. She got the upper hand over her lout of a king, let us remember, in the long run, and I don't despair of seeing even you pluck up courage to reign over the kingdom you have come into possession of, some day. It wants a great deal of reforming, I can see at a glance, stately as the general effect is. I shall begin to respect you when you have succeeded in making those dismal state-rooms habitable. Do you remember how chilly we felt in them on the memorable occasion of old Lady Forrest's one ball, and how I longed to rummage among the *pot-pourri* vases, and the china dragons, and monster jars? Shall you ever dare to move them to see what secret cupboard-doors there may be behind them, Lady Bluebeard?"

Constance could not help smiling, though she coloured a little as she answered:

"I will confess something that will amuse you; but you must not talk about it to me again before anyone. I went into the great drawing-room yesterday, when Sir John was out, and to prevent myself from thinking too much of that ball and all it led up to—which you know I only half expected at the time—I began to take some of the old chintz covers off the worked chairs, and to look into the cabinets, and drag out all sorts of wonderful old treasures. I would not have the servants in to help, for fear they should take me for an inquisitive school-girl; and as I went on I got excited over my work, though with a guilty feeling all the time, as if old Lady Forrest might suddenly open the door of a cabinet behind me, and ask me what I was doing with her ancient worked chairs and her beloved priceless china. I forgot all about Sir John till I heard the folding-doors of the anteroom open (about half-a-mile from where I happened to be kneeling, with my spoils all about me), and saw in the

distance the figure of a gentleman coming through. It was quite too dark for me to make out who it was at first, and I can tell you that my heart did beat quickly, and I felt a very coward, till the intruder got near enough for me to see that it was not my husband, only Wynyard Anstice, who had come to inquire after us, and been shown in by mistake. He looked so like old times—old holiday times with the boys—that I could not help letting him see how relieved I was that it was only he, and when lights were brought, I showed him what I had been doing, and we had a good laugh over my fright. Oh Alma! such a laugh as I had not had for two whole months. Then we set to work to put things straight again, and we worked as hard together as if we had been tidying the old school-room after a sham fight on a holiday afternoon; and just as Wynyard was lifting the last china monster back to its old place on a shelf over my head the door opened again—and that time it was to let in Sir John!”

“And you told him what you had been doing?”

“Alma! He would never have thought me sane again as long as he lived. If you had been with us for the last six weeks you would know better than to expect such candour from me. I might almost as well have got myself unmarried, for he would never have taken in the idea that Lady Forrest could so conduct herself. Wynyard Anstice understood the state of the case much better than you do. He turned away from his vase, as if he had strolled up to it casually to look at it nearer, and kept Sir John in conversation cleverly till I had recovered my countenance and was ready to take my share in the talk.”

“Oh Connie, I know just the sort of imploring look you darted at him from under your eyelashes to make him do that. How you can call yourself a shy person and yet bear to make such revelations in sudden moments, I never could understand.”

“It did not tell Wynyard Anstice anything new. It was a bit out of old times for him. As he sat talking to Sir John I knew, for I read it in his face, that he was thinking to himself how characteristic all this was of the cowardly little Constance, whom he and Alma always used to scramble out of her scrapes. My imploring look did not reveal anything fresh about me to him.”

"Except that you are afraid of your husband; and oh Connie! I am afraid you would have done just the same if young Lawrence, or anyone of your old lovers, had come in."

"I did not show that I am afraid of my husband, only that I respect him, as I have always respected the proper authorities. I have not been troubling myself at all about that part of yesterday's little adventure. I really did not see that I had done anything foolish so far."

"What else have you to confess? Did you give Sir John to understand by your manner that we are still on our old terms of intimacy with Mr. Anstice, or did you stiffen back into the coldness mamma has prescribed of late, after Sir John came in?"

"That is the confession I have to make, dearest Alma, and if I decided the wrong way for your real interests and wishes, you must forgive me. I sat and thought about it while I recovered breath in my shady corner, and Sir John and Wynyard discussed the day's *Times*. I had come to the conclusion that I would not commit myself to great intimacy; I would gently slide down from the familiarity of the last half-hour to something that, while it was sufficiently friendly to be consistent, would not provoke questions from Sir John. I had, I know, called up just the right medium expression to my face, but when Wynyard got up to take leave, and held out his hand to me—I can't account for it, Alma, it was something in his eyes, I suppose, that I could not resist, just after he had been helping me—but I actually told him that you were coming here to spend the day to-morrow, and invited him to dine with us alone, at eight o'clock."

"What did Sir John think of such a proceeding—just now, when you are seeing no one?"

"He was not well pleased at first; but he has less objection to Wynyard Anstice than to others of our friends, whom mamma thinks more of, because, as he says, he knows who he is. Then, luckily for me, he had been a little put out in the morning, when he heard I had asked you to spend the day, because we should be three for dinner, and I bethought me of remarking that my impromptu invitation was given to secure an even number.

I added that you would have no objection to the *vis-à-vis* I had secured for you."

"You should not have said that."

"Well, then, I am rightly punished, for as things have turned out I have brought myself into a great—you need not smile, Alma—a serious perplexity. You bring me word that papa intends to do me the honour of dining here to-day, and I could not, no, coward as I am, I could not vex him by letting him see so soon that unexpected guests for dinner are not as welcome to Sir John as he, with his easy-going ways, had been used to make them at home. I cannot put off papa on his first offered visit; but all the same, I do tremble at the thought of what Sir John's feelings will be when he sees the party he is expected to sit down with at eight o'clock. Papa, who will come after a long day in court, with his worn, pre-occupied, Lord-Justice look, and who must either sit opposite you, or have no one to match him."

"It is only a family party."

"Our notion of a family party is undreamed of here. Can you help me to a way out of my dilemma? Can you suggest a niceish-looking lady, who would come at an hour's notice (it is five o'clock, and growing dark already), and sit quietly opposite papa, without in any way annoying Sir John?"

"Emmie West," suggested Alma promptly. "It would so please papa; he has a sore place in his conscience about the Wests, and is continually wanting us to do more for them, though he does not know exactly what. Mamma would not have Emmie asked to the wedding, and to my mind there is a sort of poetical justice in your being driven to invite her as your first guest. Come, be bold; I have often said that my first act of independence, when I had a house of my own, should be to ask all the Wests at once to dinner."

Constance made a gesture of despair.

"What am I to do, if you take it into your head that this house is *my own*, and that I can ask whom I please? Sir John has never heard of the Wests, and I never intended that he should. He has a horror of relations, and wonders sometimes whether all the boys, and you, will marry; dreading, I can see, to be

dragged into depths of vulgarity by one or other of our clan."

"As there is no saying what we may do, you had better begin to inure him early. Little Emmie West can't be looked upon as an eyesore, seated opposite to papa at dinner, I should think."

"I don't know; I have dreadful recollections of Emmie West at our Christmas parties, in scrumpy washed muslin dresses, eked out at the bottom with cheap edging, and with shoes, and gloves, and ribbons that looked as if they had come out of Noah's Ark. If that was the result when there had been weeks of preparation, I tremble to think what would be the effect of a hasty toilette."

"Better, perhaps; or stay, let us bring her here, and you shall make her a present of one of those pretty evening dresses you talk of burying. It would be a cheap bit of good nature, Connie, since you never mean to wear any of them again yourself. I will back Emmie West not to look the least bit like a poor relation, when we have dressed her up. She is just your height, and I have always had my doubts as to whether she would not turn out to be prettier than anyone of us, if she were properly dressed."

"I should like it," said Constance, "and it is perhaps the best thing to do, for I don't think Sir John objects to anything in the world so much as sitting down an uneven number at dinner. Poor Aunt West will be immensely gratified at my calling on her so soon and inviting Emmie."

"It is a capital opportunity for feeling your new importance," said Alma, smiling; "and if one is to marry grandly, one may as well get all the compensating pleasures out of the situation."

"Have you seen much of Wynyard Anstice since I left home?" Constance asked, when the sisters were driving to Saville Street.

"He called once," said Alma, the more inclined to be communicative, because there was not light enough for her sister to read her face. "He called the day after your wedding, and we had a long talk together about Agatha."

"Oh!" said Constance thoughtfully, "then I know

what happened. One can't help opening out when one talks of Agatha. I suppose I did right to go and see her in her convent when I was close to her, but it cost me a terrible fit of crying. She wanted to hear all about Sir John and my engagement, questioning me in her old earnest way; and, do you know, Alma? I found that I could not answer. I could not speak about my marriage to her as I had spoken of it to other people. It looked suddenly such a solemn thing—done forever—and I could not feel just then that I had had reason enough. In that little bare room, with Agatha in her serge dress, sitting by me, all mere outside things looked so small and mean."

Alma did not say what she thought: "You know then that you have only got outside things." She put her hand over her sister's and sat silently waiting—not without a little quick beating of the heart—for Constance to bring out the connecting thought between her first and her last remark, which she certainly had not expressed so far.

It came, at length, in a thoughtful tone. "I felt sure something had happened between you and Wynyard Anstice. When he asked after you there was a tone in his voice that told me——"

"No! no! there is nothing to tell—you must not be fanciful. I assure you that nothing passed; but, as I said before, talk about Agatha."

"Ah! but you must have said something without knowing it, perhaps, that has made him think better of you than he did a little while ago. He felt bitterly about the change in our manner to him at one time. I used sometimes to think he more than half despised us all; and though he hovered about you, he felt his liking for you a sort of bondage, and hated it in his heart. Now there is a change, and I am afraid, dear, that unless you have courage to go against mamma, you will have to do once again all that it cost you so much to do a year ago. You are a great deal stronger than I am, Alma, perhaps it would not be so difficult for *you* to get your own way, if this is what you wish, and make what people call a love-match. I am not advising it, of course; only, if one could marry a man one loved

so truly that one was not the least bit afraid of him, I think sometimes it might be worth a struggle, or even giving up a little worldly prosperity for such rest as that would be."

They had left the quarter of the town with which they were familiar by this time, and reached a drearier, more monotonous region, and Alma sat for a time without speaking, her face towards the window, apparently looking out—really looking within, though the objects which passed before her eyes gave a certain colouring and tone to her reflections. It was just one of her usual seesaws of thought and feeling, cold and hot fits, doubt and confidence swaying her alternately, with self-contempt, for not being more heartily in earnest, underlying all. It was not poverty exactly that she feared. She had not the lazy luxury-loving nature of her mother and Constance. She could have joined partnership with one of like ambition with her own; but then it must be with the definite aim of conquering fortune in the end, and worldly advancement must be as dear to him as to herself. She could not look forward to contentment except in the world's high places, or imagine herself sinking permanently to what she called a sordid life. Her father's career had always been her ideal of what was admirable in the life of a professional man; and in her glorying over his triumphs, a standard of worldly success, as the only test of worth, had been formed in her mind, and coloured all her thoughts. She could despise her mother's restless efforts for the family aggrandisement, but her own ambition was essentially of the same nature, and had the same blight of worldliness upon it. When she turned round to Constance again, her first words showed the direction her thoughts had taken.

"Papa was talking about him to me the other day," she said; "I know what he meant. It was not that mamma had set him on to speak, as she has done before. His views of things are never, you know, really the same as mamma's, though in this matter they agree in their wishes about me. He talked to me just as if I were one of the boys, like a reasonable creature with a career before me; and then, without alluding to the past, he let the conversation turn on Mr. Anstice's pros-

pects, and said how sorry he was that he was not more practical, and did not seem disposed to put himself under his advice. He said that Wynyard had just now refused something—I don't know what, but something that papa says he should have taken at his age with a view to its leading to further advancement—because accepting it would have committed him to the support of some people, or some principles that he does not approve of. Papa did not say he was altogether wrong, but he called it an ultra-conscientious scruple, such as he should have stepped over at Wynyard's age. It was the old story over again on a smaller scale, and I can see the impression it has made on papa."

"How strange! just when he is, I am sure, fonder of you than ever."

"In a way," said Alma bitterly; "but, oh Connie! not in the way in which I should like to be loved. I wonder whether there is really no alternative, and that we unlucky women have to take our choice between being a little loved by men who can see plenty of higher objects and interests in the world than our poor little happiness, and who put us last; or a good deal loved by fools, who put us first?"

"Not always," said Constance, sighing in her turn. "I don't think there is any good in expecting to be put first for long by anyone. A man's crotchets need not be like Wynyard Anstice's, about principles and imaginary things, to stand in the way of loving; the other sort serve just as well for that. But here we are in Saville Street. I wonder what Sir John's servants will think about my coming here, and if they will notice how much dingier Uncle West's house looks than even the other shabby houses on this side of the street."

CHAPTER VII.

A TURNING-POINT.

Pity would be no more
If we did not make somebody poor;
And mercy no more would be
If all were as happy as we.

THE unusual sound of carriage-wheels, and the echo-awakening footman's knock had a magical effect, in

bringing as much animation to Mrs. West's dull house as the apparition of numerous heads at the upper windows could give it; and in the long interval which elapsed before the summons brought any response, Alma and Constance had time to remark on these sudden appearances.

"That is old Mrs. Urquhart's cap at the drawing-room window; and there is another strange face observing us from the upper storey. How annoying it is that we can't call here without being stared at by all the lodgers. It is really very hard on us to have relations, who have reduced themselves to the position of lodging-house keepers. I don't wonder really now at mamma's keeping out of their way."

"It is how you will behave to me, Connie, if I marry Wynyard Anstice in an ill-advised moment, and find myself, at the end of a few years, managing a temperance coffee-house, or teaching in a board-school. I should deserve banishment more than Aunt West, for I should have run the risk with my eyes open, and she, poor thing, married in the most praiseworthy manner, the richest man that asked her."

"Ah well," said Constance, "it shows the truth of what mamma said, when she spoke to me about Sir John's offer. One is not really safe till one gets into the class above vicissitudes—the solid old gentry class—whose lands and titles can't fly away. It's a great thing to be safe. But here at last is Aunt West's old Mary Ann opening the door. I trust she won't receive us very gushingly, or pour out a whole budget of family news on the doorstep in the footman's hearing."

Luckily Mary Ann was too conscious of the state of the floorcloth and mats, reduced to mere rags by Harry's and Casabianca's recent zeal in house-cleaning, to risk a long exposure of them to critical eyes; and Constance and Alma were taken into the dining-room without as much delay as would have given Emmie and Mrs. West time to finish hiding the work they were busied upon when the carriage drove up to the door. It was an old great-coat of Mr. West's which they were picking to pieces, to make from it winter jackets for the boys. Constance, as she sat in Mr. West's own arm-chair, wrapped in her fur cloak, with her hands in her

muff to keep them warm, noticed the dark cloth-stains, and marks of rough work on her aunt's thin hands, and felt disgusted at the sight, even while she was delivering a message entrusted to her by Agatha, to the effect that the young novice considered herself happy, to be now sharing the holy discipline of poverty, of whose lessons her aunt had formerly spoken to her. Alma overheard the message, through her talk with Emmie, but she was as little disposed to be edified by it, just then, as Constance herself. She saw nothing attractive in poverty in the Wests' house, even if she could believe in its wearing a certain picturesqueness in Agatha's cell. It only irritated her to observe how Emmie's pretty soft skin had been reddened and roughened by the chill atmosphere of the room she had been shivering in all the afternoon, and that her hands were so badly stained by the coarse work she had been doing, that hardly any amount of washing and salts of lemon would serve to make them fit to be seen when she took off her gloves at dinner.

When Constance gave her invitation, and an anxious discussion as to whether Emmie could be spared for the evening began, Alma fell into silence, and busied herself by noticing all the little discomforts, and tokens of petty thrift, which the melancholy dusty room disclosed to her eyes—educated to the appreciation of very different surroundings. The sight filled her with indignation against men, who had not energy or resolution enough to save those who depended on them from sinking into such cramped and miserable conditions of life. She had no patience with Mr. West, and she tried to say to herself that misplaced scrupulousness would be just as reprehensible as idleness or incapacity, if it brought the same results into family life; more perhaps, because scruples could be overcome by a strong will, when incapacity could not. If anyone offered poverty to her, it would be because he thought her degradation (for so Alma chose to put it that day) of less consequence than his own scruples. She must not forget that there was always that standard to measure his love by, whatever his tongue or his eyes said. Constance might have chosen unfortunately, but, after all, it was not *only* rich men who kept their wives in bondage to their humours. Poor and unlucky

husbands could be quite as tyrannical, as might be gathered from Aunt West's anxious glances at the timepiece, and from the length of the discussion which still went on.

"But I am wondering what your uncle will say to Emmie's being the first member of the family invited: he has his particularities and a pride of his own," Mrs. West was explaining, in her soft apologetic voice to Constance, feeling as much as did her hearer, all the inconsistency of a ruined man presuming to keep such luxuries.

"Will papa be annoyed at your going, do you think, Emmie?" she continued, turning to her daughter; "and how are the children to be kept quiet while he is at dinner? It is Harry's late night at the office, and the boys always take a noisy fit when they are left with Mildie."

Emmie suggested that Katherine Moore had invited the boys to come up to "Air Throne," on this the first evening of her being allowed to sit up till supper-time. "It would be a great treat for the boys."

The eagerness betrayed in her daughter's voice decided Mrs. West more than her argument. Did not Emmie richly deserve that she should risk a little more grumbling than usual from Mr. West, to give her a pleasure?

"Run away then, dear, and get ready at once. Don't keep your cousins waiting. I will send the message to Miss Moore."

"Ah!" said Emmie, with a bright look round the room, as she rose to leave it, which made Alma understand what ecstasy there was for her in the thought of changing the scene for a few hours, "mamma does not trust me. She thinks there is no hope of my coming back under an hour, if I run up to tell the Moores of my good luck; but," leaning over her mother's chair as she passed it, and putting cheek to cheek that she might whisper in her ear, "I see what o'clock it is, and I won't make the evening worse for you, darling, by keeping the carriage till papa sees it, not for worlds. I will save for to-morrow all the praise I know I shall get from Katherine Moore, for daring to go out visiting in my linsey dress."

Mrs. West took comfort in the thought that it was a new linsey dress of a becoming colour, bought, instead of a floorcloth, with a part of the money left from the

sale of the necklace; and when, after five minutes' absence, Emmie came back in her winter jacket and hat, and with a gay Roman scarf, Mrs. Urquhart's last present, round her neck, the mother's fond eyes could not see anything in her daughter's looks or attire that should have made the most prosperous cousins in the world other than proud of her company. Constance noticed the approving glance, and was so much taken up in wondering whether any amount of perfect dressing would ever win her such a look from her husband, that for once the weak part of Emmie's attire, the gloves that were several shades too dark to match her dress, and a good deal worn at the fingers as well, escaped her critical eyes. Emmie was perfectly aware of the deficiency herself, and but for thoughts of Katherine Moore, would have tried to hide her hands under the flaps of her jacket when she found herself seated in the carriage opposite two fur-lined cloaks, and two perfect Paris bonnets, and two pairs of fresh innumerable-button gloves. But then, as Katherine Moore frequently observed, gloves are such a constantly-recurring problem to people who must wear them, and can rarely afford to buy them, that the only chance of peace of mind is to resign one's hands to reprobation without a struggle. When Emmie forgot the ends of her fingers, the rapid drive through the brightly-lighted streets was a piece of ecstasy for her. Alma and Constance exchanged glances of amusement when by-and-by her happiness bubbled over in snatches of more confidential talk than they were usually regaled with by members of the West family—praises of Harry, jokes about Mrs. Urquhart's encounters with Casabianca, anecdotes of Katherine Moore.

"Ah," remarked Alma, "a friend of mine heard her speak at some queer public meeting, and told me about it. I thought it an odd proceeding."

"But *he* did not," said Emmie quickly. "He admired her speech. He did not think there was any harm."

"He! who, my dear?" asked Alma, a little coldly. "How do you know anything about it?"

"He told me himself, Mr. Anstice," answered Emmie, drawing a little back into the shade of her corner of the carriage to hide her face, that had grown stupidly red in

a moment. "Did not you know he had been to our house several times lately to inquire after Katherine Moore? He was with us yesterday evening and stayed an hour. Did not you know?"

"How should I know? What business is it of mine?" said Alma indifferently. But she leaned back in silence during the rest of the drive, while Constance catechised Emmie about Katherine Moore's street adventure, and the previous life of the sisters, and ended by giving her an emphatic warning against turning out an emancipated woman on their hands.

Emmie's talk was like a peep into a new world to Alma—a topsy-turvy world, repugnant to all her tastes and prejudices—and though she was not jealous (she had too much confidence in her own power for that), it annoyed and chilled her to discover that her lover had chosen to thrust himself into such an alien region, and could apparently find himself so much at home there. Yet at the end of the drive Emmie had become a more important personage in Alma's eyes than she had ever been before. She was now in the way of hearing and seeing what Alma would give a great deal to hear and see, and might drop a word of news sometimes when her heart hungered for it, and she dared not ask it from any one who understood her better. Emmie was no longer an ignorant child, whose company, by a great stretch of good nature, could be tolerated for a little while now and then; they two might possibly have something in common henceforth worth talking about.

The change in Alma's manner which this instinct, it was hardly a thought, brought about was not lost on Emmie's quick sensitiveness, and it lessened her embarrassment when the question of the evening dress was brought forward and Constance offered her present.

Her hopes of being able to carry off the plainness of her linsey dress by a judicious disposition of Mrs. Urquhart's scarf round her shoulders were dashed by a sight of the evening costumes laid out in Lady Forrest's dressing-room, to which her cousins took her as soon as they got into the house; and, in spite of independence and Katherine Moore, she could not help being thankful to hear that they intended to make her look like other

people. Harry's spirit might take fire at the notion of her consenting to be dressed up in cast-off finery; he might call her a toady for being willing to accept a present from relations who looked down on the family—that would have to be argued out in the back-room assembly to-morrow night; but meanwhile Emmie could not but warm up to interest and gratitude when she was told to choose for herself, from a pile of treasures, all the items of a thoroughly satisfactory evening attire—shoes, gloves, ribbons, all the little niceties of dress which she had never allowed herself to hope for in perfection hitherto. Her pleasure was complete when Alma herself condescended to take an interest in the momentous choice, holding ribbons against her hair to find out the most becoming shades, and bringing out the daintiest of Constance's kid boots to suit the slim feet, at which even the disdainful maid could not help exclaiming.

At length Emmie retired to old Lady Forrest's deserted bedroom to array herself in her borrowed plumes. A discovery she had made at the last moment occupied her thoughts a good deal while she was dressing. Mr. Anstice was expected at dinner, and somehow or other the notion of appearing before him in her unwonted magnificence did not quite please Emmie. She had been wearing her oldest linsey dress, the ugly grey one, yesterday evening when he called, and only this afternoon she had pleased herself by thinking that on the occasion of the next visit, the new purple would be less offensive to eyes accustomed to look at better-dressed people. Such an improvement as that would call for no remark, it might be felt almost without being seen; but how should she keep herself from crimsoning with consciousness if he should look even slightly surprised at recognising the shabby little daw of yesterday in such manifest jay's feathers? Emmie felt a little wonder at herself that she should think so much more of Mr. Anstice's possible surprise (he might never so much as look at her) than of her uncle's, who was very likely indeed to come out with some *mal à propos* comment on her looks, but then——

The sound of a gong echoing through the house made Emmie start just as she was tying the ribbon Alma had chosen, into her hair, and prevented her finding the good

reason for this strangeness which she knew there was, and before her fingers had finished their task, Alma came in to look her over before taking her down to the drawing-room to be introduced to Sir John Forrest. There was no fault to be found. The soft, pale-green dress Emmie had chosen fitted her well, and with its puffings of white silk and bunches of snowdrops set off her pink and white complexion perfectly. A clever maid would have done more with the thick crop of dark brown hair, which Emmie had wound in soft coils round and round her head; but Alma pronounced that after all a more elaborate arrangement would have spoiled the shape of the head, which, left to nature, looked just the right size for the slender neck to uphold, and crowned her person as a delicately-coloured Japanese lily crowns its stalk. Emmie had a style that would not bear much decoration, Alma decided, considering her critically. It really was quite as well that her small ears had never been pierced; earrings would only interfere with the right effect. Constance, who had now joined them, pronounced this a fortunate arrangement of Providence, since Emmie was never likely to possess handsome jewels, and tawdry earrings were horrors she must never indulge in if she hoped for her cousins' good opinion. With this judicious extinguisher to any latent love of finery which the sight of the many jewel-cases on Lady Forrest's dressing-table might have awakened, Emmie was invited to follow her cousins downstairs.

"Have I ever seen Sir John Forrest?" she whispered nervously to Alma, on her way to the drawing-room. "Was he at your Christmas party last year? Will he recognise me, and wonder how I come to be wearing one of Connie's dresses?"

"No fear of his claiming acquaintance either with you or the dress," said Alma, laughing. "We did not know him ourselves at Christmas. Connie and he were caught in a thunderstorm together last August, on the Righi, and fell in love, let us say, under an umbrella. We only knew the Forrests by reputation as belonging to the most exclusive set in London till love caught Constance up among them. Now you have the whole story. Romantic, is it not, and a conquest to be proud of?"

Emmie was not sure whether the tone in which the last words were spoken was mocking or really triumphant, but as she entered the room behind her cousins she conjured up an imposing, aristocratic-looking hero for Constance's mountain adventure, and was proportionally taken aback when a stout, middle-aged man, with a grave, fat face, and grey whiskers of a very formal cut, came forward to meet the entering group of ladies, and Constance presented her to him as "Miss West, who has been spending the afternoon with Alma and me." "Miss West," not my cousin Emmie. There was not a word to bespeak better acquaintance, only, as Emmie was quick to feel, an anxious deprecatory glance, which seemed to beseech forgiveness for her being there at all, and beg for as indulgent a scrutiny as was possible from the cold, severe eyes which seemed to Emmie to be the only feature in the empty face that had anything like life in it. Constance's husband! For an instant Emmie could not believe she had heard aright, and looked eagerly towards two other figures near the fire, hoping that further investigation would show the mistake. No; they turned round, her uncle and Mr. Anstice, and Emmie felt glad that her host's greeting had only detained her an instant, for she would have been sorry to miss seeing the equally silent hand-shake that passed between Mr. Anstice and Alma when they met close to the hearth-rug. It was as good to look at as one of Christabel Moore's pictures, if only there had been a little bit of letter-press underneath to explain the meaning of the looks exchanged, that did not tell a straightforward story to Emmie. The pleading in his eyes that rested a second or two on her face, as if taking in a long draught of sunlight, and the slight quiver of her lip, and the visible effort with which she emptied her eyes of meaning, when after a second of hesitation she lifted her drooping lids, and saw how she was being looked at—what did it mean? Emmie had long had her own little theories, which she believed and rejected by turns, of Alma's and Mr. Anstice's relations to each other; but she could not quite make these looks, or the long silence that followed, fit in with any one of them.

The party at dinner was not a talkative one. Emmie, sitting opposite her uncle, whose alternate fits of absence

of mind and inconvenient talkativeness made him a formidable *vis-à-vis* for her, had time to discover that other causes than scantiness of provisions might give uneasiness to host and hostess. It might be natural enough that Constance should feel a little nervous while entertaining her father for the first time in her own house, but it did seem strange to Emmie, who thought herself versed in graver troubles than any her cousins knew, to see Constance turn pale when Sir John addressed a whispered question to a gentlemanly man behind his chair, and frowned over the answer; as pale as her mother turned, when Mary Ann brought breathless news of a catastrophe in the kitchen, which meant a bread-and-tea dinner for everybody in their house that day. Could anything go very seriously wrong in a household where dinner seemed to be an august ceremony, almost like a religious service? If so, was it good-nature or inadvertence which just at this crisis made her uncle wake up from absorbed enjoyment of an *entrée*, and address a question to Mr. Anstice, which presently drew the two lawyers into an eager discussion of a legal topic that no one seemed disposed to share with them? The effort might be well-meant, but it did not answer the purpose of bringing good-humour and ease to the top and bottom of the table.

Sir John's face grew more and more wooden, and the tone in which he said "Exactly" more and more unmeaning, at every attempt to draw an opinion from him; while Constance leant back in her chair, and played with the contents of her plate, instead of eating her dinner, very certain that her first trial at entertaining her own people was not proving a success. She had meant to take a private opportunity of begging her father not to slide into professional talk with Mr. Anstice, but the little excitement of fetching Emmie had put it out of her head; and now it seemed to her that she read in her husband's sullen face the fate of all her future efforts to bring her family about her. All the little devices for securing the relief of congenial, familiar companionship, with which she had comforted herself during the dreary *tête-à-tête* of the last six weeks, her father was blowing them *all* away with his voluble legal talk, think-

ing all the while, too, that he was doing her good service, and keeping the conversation up to the point of brilliancy he prided himself on always maintaining at his own table. Lady Forrest saw before her long, long vistas of dinners—whole years of them—during which she should sit looking at that sullen face opposite, depending on its more or less of gloom for her comfort or discomfort through the evening, and her heart sank at the prospect. Even the old family plate, in such much better taste than the heavy modern *épergnes* and salvers that were the joy of her mother's heart, failed to cheer her greatly; for what satisfaction could one get from the most perfect and unique possessions, if one were not allowed to display them before those whose pride in one's dignity seemed now the only thing that made it much worth having? Ah, there was her father launched on one of the stock anecdotes he always had recourse to at home when he felt suddenly self-convicted of having neglected the weaker intellects among his audience. Constance looked across at her husband: would he say "Exactly" at the end of the story about the Irish advocate who apostrophised a prisoner in the dock as "a serpent in a tail-coat, shedding crocodile tears, with a hat upon his head;" or would he condescend to smile at this grand *tour de force* of her father's comicality? It seemed a turning-point; and when the inevitable word in the usual dull tone came out, she felt as if it were a sentence to gloom for all the remaining evenings of her life, and she made a great effort to swallow a piece of ice-pudding to keep down a sob that threatened to rise in her throat.

Emmie wished she could help thinking everything handed to her so nice, that she longed to transport each dish as it passed to the dinner-table at home, or to Air Throne, where the boys and Mildie were probably just then feasting on stale buns with Katherine Moore. Otherwise she felt she could conscientiously tell Katherine next day that she agreed with her about the inanity of polite society, and truly preferred the noisiest and scrambliest tea at home to the grandeur in which she was sitting silent and unnoticed. Before and after the "crocodile-in-a-hat" anecdote, which diverted *her*, if no one else, she had time to hatch a good many private anxieties in

her brain ; as to whether she must have a cab to take her home, which would have to be paid from the slender emergency purse she and her mother watched over so anxiously—whether Constance would remember to tell her maid to put up the purple linsey dress, and whether she should have courage to ask any servant in the house to bring it downstairs and put it in the cab ? The longer she thought, and the oftener she glanced up at the grave faces, and decorous figures that flitted noiselessly about the room on the service of the table, the more did this difficulty loom mountainous before her.

There was some relief when the move to the drawing-room came. Emmie felt the glamour of pleasure in pretty things and luxury steal over her, as she sat by the fire sipping coffee from Sèvres china cups, that were curiosities worthy of a museum, and listened to Alma playing dreamy music on the grand piano, and still more when, seeing Constance's eyes closed, she grew courageous enough to wander about the room full of pleasant lights and shadows, keeping time to the music with little tripping steps and fancying pleasant fancies. If one were a princess, for example, living in this house, and if its owner were a prince with a face majestic and kind, like the one that had looked at her over a deep lace collar from the opposite wall during dinner, and if by some painless process all the quivering heart-strings that linked one to the thickening trouble at home were severed, so as to leave room for pleasure and delight to flow in, then to be sure—but no, Emmie's heart was too tender and loyal to allow her to take more than a minute's pleasure in even a fancy that cut her off from sharing the family pain. A vision of her mother's face, looking sad when she was not near to comfort her, pulled down her castle in Spain before it was half built, and sent her back humbly to the piano, to watch Alma's hands during her skilful playing, for the chance of carrying home some hints to Mildie that might aid that ambitious young person in her determination to become, among a few other things, a first-rate pianist.

The gentlemen entered from the dining-room while the final chords were sounding, and Mr. Anstice stopped by the piano and began to talk to Emmie, inquiring after

Katherine Moore, and referring to the night of the accident, and to one or two late visits to Saville Street, where, as it seemed to Alma, who kept her seat on the music-stool, and heard every word that passed, he had made himself very familiar in a very short time. It was always his way, and always with the wrong sort of people, she thought disapprovingly. After a while she found an opportunity for interrupting the conversation to ask a question she had intended all the evening to put to Wynyard, though she had kept it till nearly the end, not to seem too eager on the subject.

"Have you heard of the great doings we are to have at Golden Mount for Christmas and the New Year?"

"Golden Mount—do I know the place?"

"Yes, yes; you do perfectly well; and what is more, I happen to know that you have had, or soon will have, an invitation to spend Christmas week there. Golden Mount is the country house in Kent, close to Longhurst, that the Kirkmans have lately bought, and almost rebuilt in splendid style. Mrs. Kirkman knew mamma long ago, and since their rise in the world, and their becoming our neighbours in the country, they have rather thrown themselves on us for advice. They have asked mamma to manage their house-warming for them, and it is to be on a scale of magnificence, such as only suddenly-made millionaires ever think of indulging in. I can't help being curious about it, for people say that the house, and above all the new conservatories and winter gardens, are curiosities of perfection. Mamma is closeted with Mrs. Kirkman to-day, writing invitations and making plans, and we have promised to stay on throughout a whole fortnight of *fêtes*."

"I hope you will enjoy it."

"You will have the opportunity of judging how far we succeed in making it enjoyable; but you must not flatter yourself that you owe your invitation, when you receive it, to our suggestion. Mr. Kirkman wrote down your name himself, and it is due to his admiration of your talents, of which it seems he has had proof in some way or other."

"Admiration indeed! The scoundrel! He must be more vulnerable, however, than I supposed, if he thinks

it worth his while to try to stop a small growl like mine, by throwing a bribe at me."

"You are not at liberty to call my friends names, if you please."

"You don't know what you are doing when you call such a man as that your friend. You don't know what he is, as I happen to do. You have no idea of how he has made this money you talk of helping him to spend."

"Of course I have not; it is no business of yours or mine. His wife is a kind motherly old woman, who is fond of mamma, and since this fabulous fortune has, one way or another, got into the hands of people who don't know how to enjoy it, I consider we are doing good service to society by showing them how to make it useful. There are plenty of people, I can tell you, with more right to be fastidious than you or I, who will keep us in countenance only too gladly."

"What do you consider gives one a right to be fastidious in such a matter—more or less honesty, more or less dislike to divide the spoil with the spoiler, or what?"

"I won't have you wax eloquent; there is no occasion for it. It is quite a simple question. If one is never to share in entertainments unless one can account to one's own satisfaction for the money that pays for them, we shall have to keep pretty well out of the world."

"Exactly!" This was said with a playful smile, and a slight imitation of the tone so often heard at dinner, and was meant to atone for the over-gravity of his last speech; but when Alma's face did not relax, Wynyard added: "Yes, it is exactly as you said, one has to keep pretty well out of *that* world."

"But I have told you mamma and I are going into it, and that you may spend a week with us there if you like. Not that we shall be in any want of pleasant company."

There was a little pause, and then Wynyard said:

"I am glad to know that I shall not owe my invitation to a kind suggestion from anyone belonging to you. In that case I should have found it very difficult to refuse."

"Why should you refuse Mr. Kirkman?"

"I can't help myself. Look here, this packet that I am going to post on my way home to-night contains a

magazine article, the third of a series I am writing to expose the sort of dishonest speculations by which Mr. Kirkman, among others, has gained his sudden wealth. His name is not mentioned in it, but I had him in my mind at every sentence, and it was some private knowledge of a shady proceeding of his which set me on to write as I am doing. How should I feel, do you think, reading this in proof next week at his breakfast-table? About as honest as I consider my would-be host, or indeed rather less so."

"If that is all, give the letter to me instead of posting it; I suppose a writer can't be expected to burn his own manuscript, but he would not feel any sympathetic agony, would he, while another person put it into the fire? You can write three or four of these things in a month, I suppose; *one* cannot be of so much importance to you, can it—as—I don't say the pleasure of spending a week with old friends, but as abstaining from giving papa another reason for thinking you impracticable? He has no scruple about visiting Mr. Kirkman, why should you have any?"

Alma rose from her seat as she spoke, and approaching Wynyard, held out her hand to take the letter.

Emmie had been listening anxiously ever since Mr. Kirkman's name—which carried painful home associations with it—came into the talk, and now a strange fear of seeing the paper move to meet Alma's fingers possessed her. In her eagerness, she felt as if some momentous result, involving the triumph of the man who had ruined her father, over new victims, hung on Alma's getting her way, and she only just restrained herself from putting her hand on Mr. Anstice's arm to hold it back.

"Don't, Alma," she cried vehemently. "Let the letter go. I have heard mamma say that Mr. Kirkman deceived papa, and helped to ruin him long ago. It is only right that people should know and be warned in time. Let the letter go, Alma."

Both Alma and Wynyard, who had forgotten Emmie's near neighbourhood altogether by this time, were startled by the interruption, and surprised at the eagerness of the blushing face on which they turned to look at the same moment.

Emmie would be overwhelmed with shyness at the mere recollection of the part she had acted by-and-by, but for the present, shyness was burnt out by a stronger feeling.

"Ask mamma about Mr. Kirkman," she went on eagerly, "or Harry; he knows, and will tell you. Ask them what they think before you decide, dear Alma."

"Had I not better get them both an invitation to spend their Christmas at Golden Mount?" answered Alma, with something very like a sneer on her beautiful trembling lips, for she felt her cause was lost, and knew how sorry she should be when her anger was over.

"Oh, Alma!"

"Well, why not? The change of air and amusement would do them good, and it would be a sensible way of turning Mr. Kirkman's profusion to good account. A better thing than railing at him, I maintain. You cannot persuade me that the national morality will suffer from his having a guest or two more or less at his Christmas parties, any more than it would have suffered from the suppression of the paper you are putting back into your pocket, I see, Mr. Anstice."

"We are not concerning ourselves about *public* morality that I know of," Wynyard answered a little coldly; then, approaching her and lowering his voice so that only she could hear, he added: "I thought you were above bribery—and such a tremendous bribe as that one to me—a week with *old friends*, I think you said,—well, my comfort all through my solitary week will be to know how you would have despised me if I had accepted it."

"Not at all. I was in earnest at the moment, but now I really think you had better not go. People who feel differently on almost every subject had better keep out of each other's way. You have lately, it seems, grown accustomed to such very intellectual society in the Saville Street attics—'Air Throne,' I believe my cousins call it—that anything terrestrial must appear very low-minded indeed to you. We shall each, no doubt, enjoy ourselves equally among our new friends and forget all about old ones."

"Speak for yourself," said Wynyard, quickly. "I

shall have no gaieties to put recollections of past Christmases out of my mind. Must I really keep them all to myself this year? Shall you not be able to spare a poor quarter of an hour even at the end of the year for a glance back to the days when we did not feel differently on almost every subject—as you profess we do now?”

Alma turned back to the piano to collect her music at this, and though Wynyard followed and stood beside her for a minute or two, affecting to help her, he got no answer whatever to his question. If she had spoken what was in her mind she would have retaliated on him with another query. How could she believe in the sincerity of regrets for past happiness when opportunities for making it present were so lightly thrown away—for a mere scruple? What better could she do than drown all thoughts of the refusal that hurt her pride so deeply, by entering with all the zest she could command into splendours and gaieties which he might have made so much more than empty shows for her? She mentally registered a resolve so to drown her pain, and though perhaps there might have been a relenting if she had looked up and seen the eyes that watched her—pleading for another word or two—the opportunity for further conversation did not occur. Her father came to the piano, before she had finished tying up her music, to tell her that their carriage was announced, and to beg her not to keep it waiting, as he had arranged with Constance to send Emmie on to Saville Street in it when it had dropped them at their own door.

Emmie was too full of her own relief at being informed by the servant who brought her cloak that her other belongings had already been placed in her uncle's carriage, to notice the formal hand-shake, given without the least upward glance on either side, with which Alma and Wynyard Anstice parted.

CHAPTER VIII.

SPIDERS' AND NORNIR'S THREADS.

Much like a subtle spider which doth sit
In middle of her web, which spreadeth wide;
If aught do touch the utmost thread of it,
She feels it instantly on every side.

Our souls sit close and silently within,
And their own web from their own entrails spin.

"SPINSTER, fairy spinster, don't hinder your sister's spinning any longer; I want the money I am spinning out of my head quite as much as you want the gold and silver fly wings your threads are to catch; let me go on with my thread now, little idler."

"Idler!" echoed Katherine Moore from an arm-chair by the corner of the fire, where she was lying back watching her sister at work before her easel, with the placid content of a convalescent in seeing others busy. "Idler, indeed! if I could put myself into the spider, would not I retort on you? I have been watching you both for a whole quarter of an hour, and you know you mean to sweep away all the delicate threads it has woven between the top of your brush and your paper in a minute or two. I wonder you have the heart to let it waste its work, seeing it has to come out of its body, as yours out of your brain."

"It is play," said Christabel, "not work. She knows very well, this clever little spinster, that there is no stable place for a useful fly-catching web at the corner of my easel. It is just a day-dream of impossibly delicious flies she has been indulging in this afternoon, not solid work, and meanwhile we spinsters have been having a good deal of talk with each other on our methods of spinning, and she has given me some useful hints. Now, by your leave, Mrs. Spider, I must pull down your castle in the air, I am afraid, and take you into a commonplace corner, where you will have to do real work. The afternoon is getting on, and I must finish my task in the short daylight. Neither you nor I shall get anything to eat by castle-building."

The window of the attic faced westward, and in these short winter days Christabel was glad of all the light she could get, that she might prolong her work to the last possible minute, for Katherine's illness had brought unlooked-for expenses, as well as thrown the burden of keeping the common purse filled, entirely on her hands. Luckily there had been—was it by chance, or by some friendly contrivance—an influx of paying work in Christabel's line that could be done at home, and Christabel had never felt her invention so ready or her energy so untiring as in these last weeks. Was it really the end of the year, she sometimes asked herself; really the cold dead time that usually had a depressing effect on her quicksilver nature? It felt so much more like spring, so much more like the beginning of something—a dawn rather than a death of the year—that, lifting her eyes sometimes suddenly from work that was progressing well, she was quite surprised to catch sight of bare heads of trees powdered with snow in a distant square garden.

There had been two dreadful weeks, when Katherine lay in severe suffering and some danger, more from the effect of the blow on her head than from the broken rib, and when Christabel, during her day and night watching, had had the agony of meeting the beloved eyes so clouded with pain, that there was hardly any recognition of her in them. The loneliness of that time, when the soul on which her soul hung seemed shrouded away from her, had been terrible to Christabel. Was it wonderful that the giving back of the old happiness should seem a new era in her life, and make her whole world sweeter, larger, more beautiful a thousand times, than it had ever appeared before? Christabel did not see any cause for surprise, only for endless delight in the enlarged capacity for work and enjoyment that had come to her; and Katherine's mind was too quiescent yet, from bodily weakness, to find more than a pleasant repose in acknowledging the new power and energy displayed by her sister in their time of need. Their evening talks had ceased since Katherine's illness, so that the elder sister really knew much less than formerly of what was passing in Christabel's mind. At first she had been too weak for much conversation, and since she had become stronger

they had frequently had visitors in the evening. While Katherine lay back in her chair watching her sister, after she had drawn her easel closer to the window and fallen to work again, she fancied that she detected something in her looks that betokened an expectation of visitors to-night. What was it? Those bright knots of blue ribbon that showed to advantage among the ripples of her red-brown hair, a something in the dress, or an air of anticipation in her face, whose expression was certainly less still and indrawn than formerly? Then Katherine smiled at the turn her thoughts were taking, saying to herself that it would be a strange result indeed of their withdrawal from the world if Christabel, whose habit it had been to shut herself up like a snail in its shell from all acquaintances in their old, young-lady days, should take to decking herself out for the fascination of old David Macvie and Mrs. Urquhart, or grow excited at the prospect of an invasion from downstairs by Harry West and his brothers in the course of the evening. No, it could not be that. It must be some unusually sweet fancy stirring within, that brought the gleam of a smile coming and going, the rosy glow like the brightness of coming day, to the dear face she was watching; and the pretty dress and bright knots of ribbon had no doubt been donned to celebrate their return to their old homely, lonely ways, and not in expectation of intruders. There had been a long interregnum, a melancholy interruption to all their plans, and for the first time during her recovery, Katherine's thoughts went back to the day of the accident, and she occupied herself in tracing out all the consequences that had followed upon it, till the last gleam of afternoon sunshine had passed away from the room, and Christabel was driven to the fire to warm her chilled fingers and rest for a few minutes, before beginning fresh work that could be done by lamplight.

"No, don't take your embroidery-frame just yet," Katherine begged. "Half an hour of having you sitting idle by my side will do me a great deal more good than all the nourishing things your extra work could buy for me. Come, I am well enough now to be Dr. Katherine again, and prescribe for myself, and I order

myself an hour's happiness, which means the feeling your head resting against my knee and your hands lying idle in mine, while we talk as we used to talk. Come, here is your stool. How long it is since you sat resting, while I moved about the room, on that November night when we last went out together!"

"Yes," said Christabel, "we had been congratulating ourselves on the quiet lives we were leading, and the next thing that happens is a blow, not meant for you at all, that shatters our routine like a Venice glass, and carries us straight into quite a new order of things. Witness, that you are at this moment seated in Mrs. Urquhart's most comfortable arm-chair, and that, instead of there being a red-herring grilling on the fire for our supper, a dainty little dish will come up presently from the 'Land of Beulah,' with Dr. Urquhart's professional commands laid on you to eat it. Six weeks ago how impossible such circumstances would have seemed to us—as the result, too, of a man, whose name we don't even know, getting drunk and beating his wife."

"Threads," said Katherine. "I have been thinking of that ever since you spoke to your spider. The grey and the gold, the smooth and the tangled, so twisted together that one cannot say whether it is a dark or a bright spot that is being woven into the web. To think that a blow aimed in hate should have brought such a flood of kindness about us!"

"Let us go over it all, and tell out our mercies," said Christabel. "I feel just in the mood for that to-night. Do not let us leave anything out."

"I will begin then with old Mrs. Urquhart's noble courage in putting aside her suspicions of me," said Katherine, smiling, "and venturing her darling son so freely in our dangerous society. I know it has cost her terrible pangs, and it is a real triumph of benevolence that she has not only borne her own sufferings without complaint, but spent her solitary evenings in planning alleviations for mine. She is a dear old heroine, and deserves the reward that will come by-and-by, when her eyes begin to be opened."

"Oh, oh!" cried Christabel; "you need not explain

yourself; our thoughts have leaped together. You have seen it, then?"

"When I was too weak to telegraph my amusement across the bed to you. Does it not give quite a new sensation to be watching the dawn and progress of the first real little love-story that has ever cropped up under our observation? I should have scolded Dr. Urquhart away many and many a time, when he has been spending an unnecessary half-hour with me, if I had not been so interested in observing the curious effect Emmie West's presence anywhere about the room, has in drawing him to the spot from whence he can best see her. I am making observations on a kind of electricity and magnetism hitherto unknown to me, and I don't think it is waste of time in a professional woman, all whose knowledge of the subject has to be gained from the outside."

"Emmie does not seem to notice the magnetism herself."

"No, and that is why it is such an interesting psychological study. I am watching to see when the consciousness on the other side will wake up, just as we watched for the green shoots to peep out from your bulbs last year, after we had put the hyacinth-glasses in the sun. As I am very careful, and determined to keep my observations strictly from everybody but you, I don't fear any counter-magnetism from my watching."

"You do not, then, wish to counter-magnetise?"

"Oh no; why should I? I have always thought highly of Dr. Urquhart, and our recent experience surely more than confirms first impressions. When the inducement of ingratiating himself with Emmie West is largely allowed for, there is still a remainder of pure goodness in his conduct to us, and though I must not call myself even a regular student of medicine, yet I know enough to appreciate the high professional skill he has shown in his treatment of me."

"Oh, Kitty, Kitty!" laughed Christabel, "that is speaking like a professional woman indeed. Now I get a glimpse at the awful heights of reasonableness to which scientific training is to lift the female mind by-and-by. The notion of mentioning professional skill as a qualifica-

tion for winning love, could only have occurred to an incipient M.D."

"I did not," said Katherine. "I only gave it as a reason for *my* thinking him worthy."

"Don't dwell on that reason before Emmie though, if you wish to repay Dr. Urquhart for curing you. She has not your devotion to science, and needs another sort of bird-lime, I imagine, to catch her fancy. Dr. Urquhart is doubtless an observing man, but I doubt whether he acted as cunningly as he supposed, in bringing his microscope up here on pretence of its being useful to you by-and-by. He won't win Emmie's heart by showing her rotifers. She is always thinking of something else while she looks through the lens, and Mildie is the only person whose imagination is at all impressed by the wonders he descants upon so enthusiastically. Luckily there is another side of his character, and other deeds of his, with which Emmie will have more sympathy when she gets to know them. For example, his goodness in attending your poor woman through the brain-fever that came on when her wretch of a drunken husband was sent to prison for beating her and you; and—another little anecdote, which you shall have the pleasure of telling Emmie, since you declare yourself the doctor's partisan already. Do you remember the day of his second call, when you told me to offer a fee both to him and the surgeon who had set your broken rib, and I had to empty our poor purse of its last coin to make up the dreadful little white packets? I was not of course at all surprised when he pressed the one I offered him back into my hand, and said, with a fine smile, that doctors do not take fees of each other; but I had a shock when, after he had left the room, I took up the purse I had carelessly laid on the table and found a five-pound note folded neatly in one of the divisions. Those skilful long fingers of his, that look as if they were made to feel pulses, and put butterflies' wings under microscope-glasses without ruffling a feather, had managed this little manoeuvre without my seeing what he was about; and, Kitty darling, that first fortnight, while you were so ill and I had no heart for work, would have been a bad time for us if there had not been his little store to fly to."

"I wondered how you had managed, and meant to

face the question of what debts we had incurred when I felt strong enough to bear it."

"Your brother-doctor is our only creditor, and I have already put aside something towards paying him back, and hope to make up the entire sum when I take my next batch of work to my employers. The trouble will be to think of some equally ingenious way of returning the note to him when we have it ready."

"I shall not take that trouble. I shall put the money back into his hand and look him full in the face while I thank him for lending it, and for all his other goodness to us. I don't want him to feel that there is any necessity for having recourse to delicate devices. That, to my mind, would be confessing we were ashamed of the struggle we had entered upon, and wanted to be looked at in some other light than *workers*, ready to take the ups and downs of a life of struggle, and to receive help from our fellow-workers as freely as we hope to render it by-and-by."

"Well, then, I will leave you to educate Dr. Urquhart into your notion of male and female comradeship in professional duties. I am afraid I am backsliding into a depraved taste for the little delicacies and shy devices that aim at throwing something of poetry over our obligations to each other. It is old David Macvie, however, who is spoiling me. What do you think of his having walked, I dare not think how many miles out of London, twice a week, to get fresh eggs for you, from a farmhouse in the country where he once lodged? He brings them back packed in moss, and looking fit to paint. He could get them nearly as good from any shop close at hand, without any trouble; but then there would not have been the same excuse for offering them to us, and he would have been afraid of hurting our feelings. Do you object to that? Would you rather he presented us with two shillings a week, as he would certainly do to a fellow-journeyman who had met with an accident, and knocked off his work?"

"Dear old David! what can we do for him when I am well again?"

"I plead for little womanly devices. See, I am embroidering him a splendid smoking-cap, to wear in the evening when he sits with his back to that draughty door."

It won't match well with his snuffy coat and his old Scotch wig; but he will delight in wearing it, I know."

"I will leave David's recompense to you; there is no fear of his misunderstanding us; but I see a great many fresh things about the room, which don't to my mind look like the Urquhart belongings, and which certainly never came from the West region of the house. That basket of ferns, and the litter of books, patterns, and engravings round your easel—can David be responsible for them all?"

"I wonder you don't see whom they are like; but now that we have you in the sitting-room again, you will learn the new comers and goers your illness has brought about the place. The basket of ferns came this morning before you were awake, and it was Mr. Ralph Anstice who left it at the door; the gentleman who carried you out of the crowd, Kitty, and who has been several times to ask after you since."

"I seem to remember several bouquets of flowers that came to my bedside when I was ill. Were they all from the same quarter? It was kindly thought of."

"Was it not? I class the flowers with David Macvie's moss baskets—the careful-useless presents that one values especially, because they have cost the giver more thought than money. Just look at these monthly roses, and at the branch of arbutus among my ferns, and the trailing ivy sprays round the handle of the basket, and the hips and haws which make one feel as if one had a bit of a Devonshire hedge-row in the room. They did not come out of a London flower-shop. Someone has walked a long way to gather them for us. Shall I shock you, Kitty, by confessing that I have backslided into helpless young ladyhood so far as to like that people should take a little trouble for us, as a change, darling, while you are ill? We will go back into being independent trouble-takers by-and-by."

"I see you have been making a study of the arbutus branch and the ivy for one of your drawings. I am not disposed to quarrel with anything that helps you now you are working so hard."

"It was an understanding piece of help, such as one can't but be grateful for. I was grumbling over my work yesterday, and saying that I had come to an end of my

copies and my invention, and early this morning came these beauties to give me fresh inspiration, and make to-day's work a thorough feast."

"Did not you tell me one day that this Mr. Anstice was an artist himself? I suppose that is how he comes to know what to send you."

"I fancy he is an artist, but I don't remember that he exactly said so. His name is Raphael, though he says most people call him Ralph, and he told me once that drawing was his only gift. I don't think he has done much with it yet, however. He said that he and his cousin were discussing his next step in life, that very evening when he first saw us. He speaks as if, like ourselves, he had very few friends, and I suspect that he is a sort of poor cousin of the elder Mr. Anstice, partly perhaps dependent on him."

"You seem to have got to know a good deal about him in a few short visits."

"We have talked a little, it is true; he came up here on one of the first days after you began to mend, when I was in a peculiarly happy sympathetic mood, and it was then that he told me about himself. After a bit, I, for once in my life, grew communicative in my turn, and it was odd the number of coincidences in our early experience that kept coming up. I made out plainly that he had been the same sort of snubbed uncomfortable child that I was, and with no Kitty to stand up for him, only a clever popular cousin who occasionally condescended to stretch out a patronising hand. It was quite delightful to me to meet a person who looks back to childhood with even greater horror than I do, and who can sympathise with me in my utter disbelief in the popular notions about it."

"Ah, you have got a long way indeed beyond me in this acquaintance. I recollect seeing your artist, certainly. I recollect his coming into the next room to speak to me, but my impression of him does not somehow fit in with what you are saying."

"You shall study him now, then, till you get the right impression," said Christabel, drawing a portfolio towards her, and taking out a sheet of paper, and holding it up before Katherine's eyes. "There, look at him by fire-

light. I don't call it exactly a likeness; but one day Emmie West encountered him here, and after he had left we chanced to speak about his being an artist, and called Raphael, and *à la* West she nicknamed him the 'Affable Archangel' on the spot. Don't sneer at her, Kitty, she is a little bit of a school-girl still, I allow, but my pencil was working away all the time she talked, and here it is, you see, a recollection of Perugino's picture of 'Tobit and the Angel,' with the face I saw protecting you in the crowd between the angel's crimson wings. What do you think of it?"

"You have put a great deal more in this face than there is in the real one, but I suppose you meant to do that. You say it is not a likeness."

"*More* do you say? As if I were artist enough for that! Kitty, you are not going to set up a pair of independent eyes on the score of having had your head broken lately. I forbid that; we have always seen alike till now, and I can't let you do anything else."

"I promise at all events that as soon as we have lost sight of the real Raphael Anstice, I will try to remember him like the 'Affable Archangel' of your picture. It will throw a halo over the disagreeable sights of that evening, if I can remember him in such guise."

"Give me back my drawing; I am going to light the lamp and get out my embroidery to punish you for your bad criticism."

"You are not really vexed with me, darling?"

"Oh no; but I thought we were to count out our new-found pleasures, and we have hardly begun when you talk as if they were all to slip away from us immediately."

"To leave us, as the interruption found us, perfectly content with our work and each other,—independent of outsiders. Won't it be so, dear? Is not this what you are looking forward to? There will be gratitude of course due to those who have helped us through this strait; new links with the outside world, perhaps, but nothing that touches the real core of our lives."

Christabel was busied in tying the strings of her portfolio, and did not answer, but neither did she get out her work as she had threatened. She wandered about

restlessly, after she had lighted the lamp, arranging her ferns and ivy in different parts of the room, and pausing before the window every now and then to peep through its white blind into the street far below, more than usually thronged that evening with passengers intent on Christmas purchases, or hurrying to places of entertainment. Presently she went into the inner room and came back with her hat and cloak on.

"I have such an overpowering wish to go out, Kitty, she said. "You won't think me unkind, dearest? Mrs. Urquhart is coming up to spend the evening with you, and I don't feel quite in the mood somehow to sit still and hear her talk. I have only been out twice since you were ill, and a raging thirst for fresh air and movement has been upon me ever since that bit of hedgerow walked into our room this morning. I have been keeping it down with a strong hand all day, telling myself there was nothing pleasant to be seen out of doors, but now the lamplight and the hurrying people seem to promise something, and I feel I must go."

"You can't wander about alone in the dark."

"But I can go to David Macvie, and coax him to come out with me. Even the short walk to his house and the sight of his clocks will do me good. I want to feel myself an independent out-of-door woman again. Besides, there are purchases to be made for Christmas Day. We did it together last year, don't you remember? I must console myself for being alone by hitting upon some nice little surprises for you. You will let me go?"

Katherine put her hand over her eyes, and a nervous quiver passed over her mouth as she remained silent a moment, then she looked up.

"I did not know my nerves had been so shaken. It will be a struggle, I see, but I must conquer it, or all I have done hitherto to prepare myself for the training I aspire to, will go for nothing. At any rate, I will not turn my unfortunate adventure into a bondage for you, and force you back into a useless woman because I can't bear you out of my sight without a legion of protectors. I will trust you with David."

"Or without him when it is necessary," said Christabel, stooping down to kiss the tremor out of the pale lips.

"Think of the hundreds of girls who are setting forth in London on this same errand to-night, carrying back little bits of work for payment, and plotting as they go, how to make the most of their money. Why should I come to more harm than any one of them? I can't waste daylight in shopping at this time of year, and purchases must be made sometimes."

"Yes, dear, you are right to go; David will delight in the shopping. Mind you leave all the bargaining to him, and bring him back to this door with you. I know it is foolish to have a terror of that dark crossing in the shadow of the railway bridge, but I am afraid I shall be picturing you there incessantly till I have you safe at home again. Well, perhaps I shall be all the better physician for women for having had a good wrestle with nerves myself."

They were still talking and holding hands preparatory to parting, when Katherine felt a twitch in Christabel's fingers as if an electric shock had gone through her, and immediately afterwards there came the sound of a man's step on the stairs, followed by a knock on their door.

"Who can it be?" said Katherine, "it is too early for Harry West or David Macvie, and Dr. Urquhart was not to come again to-day."

"I think it is the 'Affable Archangel,'" whispered Christabel, with a smile and a glow on her face; "he said something about calling once again to bid us good-bye before he left London, and he may want to know if the ferns reached me safely. Shall I tell him you are up, and not well enough to see visitors, or may he come in for a few minutes just for you to judge of the likeness, Kitty?"

A second louder and rather impatient knock interrupted the whisper, and, on a sign from Katherine, Christabel went to the door, and opened it to admit a tall young man holding a great bunch of evergreens in both hands. In his eagerness to greet Christabel, and the confusion of entering the lighted room from the dark passage, he knocked his head against one of the low beams near the door, and scattered the greater part of his offering at her feet. The little commotion that

followed in gathering up the sprays, covered any shyness there might have been in Christabel's welcome, given for the first time under Katherine's eyes, and prevented Katherine from making hers as formal as she had, at the first moment, intended it should be. She was prepared to look very critically on this suddenly-made intimate of Christabel's, but when, after a short delay, the tall figure stepping over some scattered branches of holly that had rolled on to the hearth-rug, approached her chair with an exclamation of cordial satisfaction at seeing her up, she could not help acknowledging to herself that there was real kindness and sweetness in the eyes that beamed down upon her, and she answered in her own natural cordial tones, free from *empressement*, and free from shyness :

"You and I seem fated to preface our meetings with blows on the head ; I hope yours has not suffered from your ignorance of attic roofs as severely as mine did the last time we met."

"Not at all ; and you must not, if you please, accuse me of ignorance of attics, for I assure you, that taking all the hours of my life together, a large proportion of the best of them have been spent under the roof. I used to vote the attics at home the only endurable part of the house, and they were not to be compared to these of yours. Why, this room is magnificent ; you might get a regiment into it."

"Of tin soldiers," said Christabel, laughing. "It must have been a reminiscence of those old battles with steadfast tin soldiers fought under the roof you told me about, which made you say that ; though, judging by the quantity of 'Christmas' you appear to think we require for our decorations, you must indeed have got into your mind a grand idea of the space we occupy."

"Will these things be in your way, then ? You can burn them, you know, if you don't care for them ; only you said something about wanting branches of trees to copy, and I was afraid you might not find anything good enough among those I sent this morning. Look here !" stooping down to pick up something that lay on the floor under a branch of *laurustinus*, "I hit upon

this when I was looking round, and I fancied you might think it worth having."

This was a beautiful pale yellow tea-rose, with an abundance of shining leaves, that must have cost a gardener some trouble to produce in such perfection in mid-winter.

Christabel took it in silence from the hand that offered it to her, and laid the blossom against her face, breathing its odours in a sort of quiet ecstasy, while Katherine praised the size and beauty of the flower, and ventured a little wonder as to where it had come from.

"I, in point of fact, hit upon it; I generally do find what I want if I look about me," was all the satisfaction she got, uttered in a tone of languid complacency that made her feel Christabel's theory of the poor cousin more difficult to hold than ever. Could this elegant-looking young man possibly belong to the Bohemian artist class they had read about—whose manner of life had, she knew, a certain vague attraction for Christabel; and, if so, was this new acquaintanceship on which, for the first time in her life, she seemed to be entering eagerly, a good thing for her? Katherine so shrank from the possibility of a breath of difference in opinion arising between herself and Christabel, that she hastily ordered herself not to be prejudiced, and tried to listen complacently to a desultory artistic-sounding conversation that now arose about the pretty effects of the firelight on the dark holly leaves and the laurel boughs, which Christabel had gathered into her lap, and was nursing tenderly.

Before all the evergreens were discussed and disposed of about the room to the satisfaction of the two artists, who found something to say about every leaf and spray, Mrs. Urquhart's servant appeared with a tray of good things for Katherine's supper, and a message that Mrs. Urquhart herself would follow shortly to ascertain that justice had been done to her fare. Christabel's intention of paying David Macvie a visit and asking his escort for a shopping expedition was now again referred to, rather to Katherine's disappointment, and their visitor began to look for his hat, which had rolled off into a dark corner after his encounter with the beam. He stood with it in

his hand by the door, while Christabel stooped over Katherine once more to ask if there was anything she could do for her before she left her.

"If David Macvie should be out," Katherine began.

"Now, Kitty, you have promised me not to be nervous; you are not to think of me again till I come back when my business is finished. You will try to be reasonable, won't you?"

"Especially as I shall have the pleasure of walking with your sister to the watchmaker's door, and putting her under Mr. Macvie's charge before I leave her. I will not let her get knocked down in a crowd, I promise you," said a voice from the door.

"It is not our usual habit to want people to take care of us," said Katherine, falteringly. "We are accustomed to walk through the streets and do our own business without any help, and generally we prefer it."

"Poor Kitty," said Christabel, putting her hand on Katherine's forehead and feeling how the temples throbbed. "You are so troubled just now you hardly know what you wish, and you are making yourself worse by struggling with your fears. Come now, I am not the least bit afraid of going anywhere alone, as you know, but I will be magnanimous and let myself be taken care of across that haunted corner just for once, to spare your nerves."

"And, indeed, Miss Moore, you may depend on me for *taking care*."

Katherine's eyes were shaded by Christabel's hand at the moment, so that she did not see the look that stole involuntarily under Christabel's eyelids towards the door as the unusual words "taken care of" passed her lips, or the electric glance that answered it. She might have been a little startled if she *had* seen; as it was she tried to be content, and held out her hand cordially to thank Mr. Anstice for his consideration to her foolish sick-room terrors, which no one would have blamed more than herself a few weeks ago.

The next minute she was alone, listening to quick, light steps retreating down the passage, and scolding herself for the contradictory unreasonableness which made her unwilling to let her sister go out alone, and yet grudged her being

indebted to anyone but herself for protection. What depths of suspicion and jealousy was she not sinking into? She fought this second battle with herself over her solitary dinner, and when Mrs. Urquhart came up half an hour later she found her patient looking pale and tired indeed, but sitting more upright in her chair than she had hitherto been able to do, and occupied with a task of intricate mending which she had set herself by way of antidote to uncomfortable thoughts when left to her own devices. The sight of the thin fingers busied with this womanly work warmed the old lady's heart towards Katherine, and scattered the last remnants of the prejudice she had been gradually losing her hold on through her six weeks' nursing. She began to think that perhaps there might be some mistake, and that this patient-looking woman with the quiet eyes and grave lips, who doubled down the edges of the patch she was fitting, deftly, could not have the heterodox opinions about woman's position and duties that had been attributed to her, by slanderers no doubt, or at all events that she would be ready to give them up when the right influence came. After ten minutes' observation of Katherine while she put in her even stitches, Mrs. Urquhart's old suspicion as to the person destined to exercise this saving influence awoke in her mind afresh, but now with softening reflections that mitigated its horror. After all, a woman who had known struggle, and who could put so much thought and heart into the business of converting two old flannel skirts into one new one, might (once she was disabused of wrong notions) prove a more satisfactory daughter-in-law than one of the ball-loving young ladies, whose false plaits and paint were a constant scandal to her honest old eyes.

"My dear," she began, in a cheerful tone, "I had no notion you were such a clever needlewoman, and I must say I do wonder since you *can* do such nice womanly work so well that you care to attempt—hem—other things, my dear."

"Than sewing?" asked Katherine, smiling. "But there are so many to do that, you would not have me spend my life in needlework."

"Not only sewing, but, my dear, you know what I

mean—the beautiful, homely things, the safe sheltered life of usefulness at home, that no woman looked beyond in my day, that ought to be enough for the cleverest woman I think.”

“Usefulness, yes,” said Katherine earnestly; “but perhaps not always sheltered, or at home. Why should capacity for one sort of work be made a reason for not attempting others? Why should I not put the cleverness of my fingers to uses that tax other powers as well, if I chance to have them? Why, in short, should there be any work for clever fingers which mine must not attempt because they are a woman’s?”

Mrs. Urquhart put down her knitting and stroked her chin with her hand, as she searched her brain for an answer to so many audacious questions in one breath.

“My dear,” she said at last, her eyes twinkling triumphantly over her spectacles, “Graham was reading a book of travels aloud to me last night, and we came upon an Eastern proverb that pleased me very much, and that I put by in my mind for you. ‘There is no use in trying to carry two pomegranates in one hand.’”

“I don’t catch the thought quite. What do you mean?” asked Katherine.

“Perhaps I mean, being an old woman who has had some experience in living, you see, that it takes so much for us just to be *women*, that there is no use in our trying to be anything else as well.”

“You don’t say that about men though,” said Katherine, after taking a moment for thought in her turn; “you don’t insist that a man must be a man and nothing else.”

“But, my dear, I have had some experience of men as well as of women in my long life, and I do think that there is always a danger of the second pomegranate—shall we call it—pushing the first out of the hand. Of a man growing to be nothing but a doctor, or a merchant, or a lawyer, and having all the real nature, the real manhood eaten out of him by the struggles and ambitions of professional life. If the woman by his side is not all a woman, I am afraid it would be worse for them both. There is need of one to stand out of the dust and see the sky clear overhead.”

"But is that what we women do when we let ourselves be shut up to a narrower life than we are fitted for?" said Katherine, a good deal moved. "Don't you think there are other things besides the dust raised in the struggle and toil that may hide the sky from us? May we not be so cramped and bound that we never lift our eyes from counting the pebbles that hurt our own feet? Is there anything worse than spending one's life in eating one's own heart for want of something better to do?"

"There is always plenty for the right sort of woman to do at home, as it seems to me, my dear, without seeking farther."

"Women with one kind of experience think so, I know, and they are often—forgive me for saying this—very hard on other women to whom fate has given quite another. Your experience is of course a great deal wider than mine, but I don't think it can have taken in the problem of such lives as my sister and I were leading before we came here, with nothing to do, nothing to hope for, and with a consciousness of power, not exceptional perhaps, but still power to do and be something that would make life worth living. If it had been affection that imposed inaction upon us we should have resigned ourselves perhaps, but the people who had the ordering of our lives, and who wished to pare them down to their own standard, did not love us or understand us in the least. They could not even make any use of what we had to give them. We were as much thorns in their sides as they in ours, for their whole energies and thoughts were given up to the task of seeming richer than they were, and for that business we had no capacity. Can you not imagine what it was to us to open our eyes as we grew up to the meanness, the utter falsehood of the lives we were all leading, and then when we heard of possibilities of noble living which other women were entering upon, are you surprised that we panted for the chance as the thirsty pant for water, and that we took courage and broke quite away from our restrainers at last, and took our destiny into our own hands?"

"That depends, my dear, on whom the people were, you speak of—relations?"

"A step-aunt and cousins who had felt us to be burdens ever since we were thrown upon their charity, and who

bitterly grudged every advantage of education which in desperation I clamoured for, because they felt every shilling spent in that way so much taken from their power of keeping up the outside show for which they lived. Their family pride and prejudices make them ashamed of the independent course we are taking now, and they dread our succeeding so far as that our names should be talked about, otherwise they are glad to be rid of us. Was I not right to take the risk of setting up for ourselves?"

"I acknowledge the hardship of such a life, but I think you would have done better to wait. Many lives begin hardly; mine was uneventful, and what you perhaps would have called circumscribed at first; but I just waited patiently where I was, and after a while change came naturally. Love opened a wider sphere to me, and I have always had plenty to do, and suffer, and enjoy since; and I don't quite believe myself that anything but *that* will really give a woman what she wants, or put her in the way of doing the best sort of work."

"Even if what you say is true, since there are so many women to whom the change you are speaking about never comes, had they not better look out for the next best sort of work they can get hold of?"

"I think there is such a virtue in waiting. Something, perhaps not marriage, but something would have come to you without your seeking it, if you had waited."

"Weariness, and middle-age, and deadness of intellect would certainly have come to us, and what a stock-in-trade these would have been to begin the struggle upon! It is hard enough to find a fit sphere for active work with youth and energy on our side. No, I can't bear the thought of there being more and more women every year whose youth is to be spent in looking out for, and seeing pass by them, a chance that should come as an unsought election, a glad surprise, if it is to come at all. No, I am glad that Christabel and I are workers in the present, not waiters on chance any more!"

"I did not say anything about *chance*, and I don't despise even the waiters so much as you do, my dear. I come back like an old woman who can't argue to the point I started from, and say that if they are keeping fast hold

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of their one pomegranate, they are perhaps doing the best work for themselves and others, the work nearest them. I can't help wishing that you had not looked so far out of the way for yours. Would it not have been wiser for you, so inexperienced and thrown upon your own counsels as you are, to have taken some humbler, more settled path to independence where many had been before, and where there would have been no question of your womanly right to enter? Why trust yourself where you must walk alone, and where perhaps you are not wanted? Why choose to cross a dangerous stream on uncertain stepping-stones?"

"I have chosen the work I believe I can do best, and that I am certain I shall love best. If I succeed, I shall have the joy of thinking I am making the road safer for other women who feel as I do. You need not pity me—I am no coward looking forward to an easy life; I know what sort of a lot I have chosen, and I am prepared for a great deal of misconception and privation, and for real suffering perhaps, before I come to a good end, and I believe I can bear it all."

"Ah, my dear, but you see it is so often not the kind of suffering one is prepared for that comes. But what am I doing? Croaking like an old raven to you, when I ought to cheer you. What will Graham say when he hears that I have let you talk till your face is flushed and your poor hands are burning again? I have shown myself a very bad nurse, and shall deserve a good scolding from the doctor when I make my confession to him. I had better go away quickly now and send you a cup of tea; that will be better for you than any more talk, till your sister comes home."

CHAPTER IX.

FORTUNATUS'S PURSE.

It runs (so saith my chronicler)
Across a smoky city;—
A Babel filled with buzz and whirr,
Huge, gloomy, black and gritty;
Dark-louring looks the hill-side near,
Dark-yawning looks the valley,—
But here 'tis always fresh and clear,
For here—is Cupid's Alley.

THE hour which Katherine found long, to Christabel flew past in golden moments; far too short in the passing, yet each moment holding some pleasant incident, if only an unforgettable look or word, that would make the time appear strangely long when memory counted over its treasures. The frost had broken a day or two ago, and a strong, soft west wind was blowing, bringing a sensation of freshness even into London streets, and suggesting visions of wide bare fields over which it had passed, and of trees tossing their arms and groaning out winter music in woods far away.

"It was a wind that did not belong to London," Christabel said, as she put up her veil at the first street corner they came to, and turned her pale cheek to the freshening of the breeze. After her six weeks of indoor life and hard work, the soft air blowing on her face seemed to enter into her with an electric shock of gladness, and exhilarate her, as if it were a real elixir of life. After a moment's silence, she turned round to her companion for sympathy with a smile of almost childish delight.

"I am glad that Katherine let me come out to-night. There—I have thrown off a ton's weight of weariness in that moment's rest. Generally the wind itself is tired out before it ever gets to our corner, and can only blow one about and whisper fretful complaints in our ears, but this wind is a young giant, and carries floods of music and rest on his wings. I did not rightly know how tired I was till this rested me. Now I am ready for anything, and snap my fingers at fatigue for all the year that is coming. Let us hurry on to David Macvie's, that I may finish my business and get back soon to Katherine!"

"There is no need for hurry, is there? It is quite early yet. The good people in this part of the world are only beginning to come out and amuse themselves and make their purchases, while the West End folks are dining. You ought to come out oftener as you like it, and it does you so much good."

"Before Katherine was ill, we did go out every day, but it was all hurrying to and fro, with the consciousness that we were waited for at the other end of our walk. Did you ever give drawing lessons?"

"I? No—that is to say I've never been lucky enough to get any pupils as yet."

"Then you don't yet know how teachers are looked at when they arrive a few minutes late. It's a look that stings one all over one's face like a blow with a bunch of nettles; and a walk is hardly a walk with the expectation of that as a punishment for lingering. I stood still to feel the wind just now, by way of convincing myself that no one was waiting for me."

"Then let us stand still again as often as you please and walk slowly. There is no hurry, you know; we shall find ourselves at the clockmaker's long before we wish; at least I know I shall."

"If it is not keeping you from any appointment, or anything you have to do?"

"I have nothing on earth to do but, as you said just now, take care of you on that dark crossing your sister does not like."

"To-night she does not like it, but she will not think about it when she is strong, and we get back to our usual life again; we are too busy people, I assure you, to give way to fancies."

"I can't bear to think of your having to work so hard; women ought not to have to work."

"Hush! that is dreadful heresy; Katherine thinks it our chief privilege and glory, and will not endure that there should be a possibility of hardship we don't claim a share in. She would feel herself insulted if you said that to her."

"Well, you see, I can't say I consider work a privilege myself, and as for hardship—one sees a woman sometimes for whom one cannot endure the thought of it; one would

like to pave a road with jewels for her to walk upon, it is the only thing that seems fit for her."

"Katherine and I don't belong to that order of women then," said Christabel, lowering her eyes to avoid a too meaning look, which however brought a still deeper glow to the cheeks the wind had brightened. "We have taken to rough paths of our own free choice, and we find a great deal there to compensate for the sharp pebbles and puddles we sometimes come across."

"That puts me in mind of something you said once before. Stay, it was just here, close to the lamp-post we are passing now. I daresay you have forgotten, but I never shall. You looked round at your sister just here, and said London fogs were sweet to you, and that you were glad to be in them. I was passing and overheard, and I thought I would give a great deal to be able to ask you what you meant. I did not know all that was to come of it."

"You saw us before the accident? You followed us into the crowd?"

"Yes, that was when I saw you first, just here where we are standing now."

"Just here."

An electric thrill passed through Christabel as she repeated the words. She saw the crowd again swaying backwards and forwards over the spot where Katherine had fallen, and one figure, with a face that had looked to her like the bright face of a rescuing angel, pressing onward, intent only on her safety. He had followed them then with the purpose of saving, and just here the first impulse to that protectorship she had begun to feel so constant and so strange, was born—just here. She looked up to the gas-lamp, down to the flickering square of light on the pavement where they stood, and almost involuntarily held out her hand. He took and pressed it silently, and then they walked on, still without speaking, passed the fateful crossing, and turned down the little dark street where the watchmaker lived. He was surprised and perhaps somewhat taken aback at the sudden impulse that had led her to show her feeling of gratitude so frankly, he felt it had something in it a little beyond him, a little more highflown than he could quite under-

stand, though nothing had ever so moved him, or made him feel so happy before in all his life. But to her, that hand-clasp under the gas-lamp in the crowded street was a solemn acceptance of a new power come into her life, vague in its requirements as yet, but a reality, capable of usurping the realm of her dreams, and reigning there as not even Katherine had hitherto reigned. When they reached the watchmaker's, they found that the shutters were up, and the shop-door closed, though it was still early. David had probably gone out to spend a cosy evening with a brother-entomologist, or to attend a meeting at his club, and Katherine's pupil, the consumptive young jeweller who occupied the upper story of the house, had left London when the cold weather set in. Christabel stayed her companion's hand when he was about to pull the bell impatiently a second time.

"There is no one in the house," she said; "I know the look of the place well enough when it is left in the guardianship of the clocks and the butterflycases. Ringing again would only bring out the heads of the two scolding women who live next door on each side, and who might perhaps revenge their last quarrel with David, on us, by throwing cabbage-stalks at our heads. Well, it is a pity! I don't think the streets ever before looked so inviting for a stroll as they do to-night—but never mind. I can make some of my purchases on my way back to Saville Street, and I have already had a walk that has done me good. Thank you for it."

"You are not dismissing me here; I never heard of such a thing," cried Lord Anstice, stammering with eagerness. "Of course I shall see you safe home, for I promised your sister that you should not come to any harm, and how can I tell unless I see? And, besides, why are you in a hurry to go back? Your sister won't begin to expect you till the hour when you would have returned, if you had had a walk with the old man. Why should you go home earlier than you first intended?"

"No, Katherine won't expect me for another hour," said Christabel; "it is very pleasant out of doors to-night, and if you have nothing better to do——"

"I could not do anything that I liked better."

They had reached the corner of the side street now,

and Christabel stood for a moment or two irresolute, looking wistfully through the railway-arch towards a better quarter of wider streets and brightly-lighted shops that lay beyond. Just outside the arch was the opening to the square,—whose trees, not snow-powdered now, but black and bare, could be seen from “Air Throne,”—and the broad road that followed stretched—a long vista of lessening lights and converging crowds, into a dim distance of mist and light. Christabel’s eyes dilated as she gazed, and when she turned them on her companion, they had still the dreamy, far-seeing look that made them so different from other eyes.

“Do you know,” she said, with the delightful smile expectant of sympathy which had hitherto been kept for Katherine alone, “I don’t know how it is, and I am half ashamed of it, but a scene like this moves me a great deal more than most country views, I don’t say than all, but beyond most that I have seen. If I ever paint a real picture—I never may, but if I do,—it will be something made up of light and darkness, stillness and movement, contrasts of life, such as you will see if you look down there.”

The spot to which she pointed was the space, half in bright gaslight and half in shadow, between the corner house of the square and the railing of its garden, which, in comparison with the thronged pavement of the main road close by, looked almost deserted. A ragged boy was standing in the circle of light made by the bright door-lamp of the corner house, thrumming a guitar, while his companion, a little girl fantastically dressed, had seated herself on the lowest step of the house, and was resting her spangled head on one hand, the tambourine hanging uselessly from the fingers of the other. Farther back in the shade of the trees, a group of ragged children were dancing in time to the music; their uncouth gestures, and dingy faces and garments, making them look wild and spectral in the partial gloom in which they moved. As Christabel spoke, the girl on the doorstep sprang up, and holding the tambourine over her head, resumed her task—suspended for that one moment’s rest—of twirling round and singing in a shrill, sweet, childish voice, that rose above the

noises in the street, and reached to where the observers were standing.

"I know the tune," Lord Anstice remarked a little indifferently, for Christabel's admiration of such a common bit of London life puzzled him. "I have heard it at theatres and places very differently sung; but she keeps the time wonderfully, and the voice is not bad for the open air."

"It has spoilt it all to me," said Christabel. "She was a picture a minute ago, and now she is a poor little tired child, singing for her supper, with very little chance perhaps of getting a satisfactory one. Let us go and give her a penny."

This movement decided the question of Christabel's prolonged walk. When they had turned from the little singer—into whose tambourine Lord Anstice threw two pieces, that were not, as Christabel saw by the lamplight, brown pennies, but white half-crowns—they were in the main street, among the shops brightly lighted and decorated, and set out temptingly with Christmas gifts and Christmas cheer. The most inviting provision shops had not only their throngs of busy purchasers coming and going, but were besieged by lingering groups of wistful, hungry-eyed children and pale women, who hung about the windows to look with longing eyes on luxuries that were not for them, and who scattered whenever a voice of authority from within, or a policeman's step approaching without, warned them away. Into one or two of these shops Christabel turned to give brief orders, and make small payments, and brisk little interludes of conversation passed between herself and her companion as they waited for their turn, among the throng of purchasers, or hurried from one place to another. Christabel had hitherto hated the details of housekeeping, and left the dispensing of their slender funds to Katherine's skill, but to-night the little perplexities that arose from the necessity of proportioning the contents of the purse to the wants it had to satisfy, only exhilarated her, and when in the lightness of her heart she explained her difficulties to her new friend, and he volunteered astounding suggestions, which revealed profounder depths of ignorance on economic questions

than her own, they laughed together over their mistakes like two children playing at responsibility.

"That is the last," said Christabel, coming out of a grocer's shop, where they had been longest detained, "and you see it is as well," holding up a worn leathern purse that plainly showed its emptiness. "Katherine and I never get anything we can't pay for at the time and we never need, this good little purse always has just enough in it; but tell me now, do you ever wish to be rich—on some such night as this, for example, when you are out making purchases, have you ever felt a burning covetousness enter your soul?"

"I don't know. I used to wish awfully to be rich, but somehow or other, lately, I've got to think that perhaps there's not so much in it as one fancies."

"You're right about ordinary riches. I never in my neediest moment wished for a settled income of so many hundreds or thousands or even millions a year. I am quite well aware *that* is never enough, and always turns out to be a mere encumbrance. I have no faith whatever in riches that people know all about and expect you to spend properly: but Fortunatus's purse I should like to have. A purse with always a sovereign and a shilling in it is what I desire; and if I had it I am convinced that I should use it a great deal more sensibly than the shadowless man did. I should not pull out my money recklessly, so as to excite people's suspicions by the sight of heaps of gold. I should keep the purse close in my pocket, and go modestly about the world, feeling that I might spend my pound and my shilling on any fancy that came into my head, without owing the slightest responsibility about it to myself or anybody—there would always be another ready, and no second thought about my spendings should ever trouble my conscience. To-night, for instance, I would go into that crowd before the grocer's shop we have just left, and pick out the palest and most wistful-looking of those women and the shabbiest child, and I would take them back with me, and for once in their lives give them as much of every one of those good things they are devouring with their eyes, as they could carry home, *more* than they

want. What a story it would be to them for the rest of their lives. One unstinted, undeserved piece of good luck, coming they did not know where from, and leaving no obligation behind it. I should like, beyond anything else in the world, to go about sowing such stories—for once in my life at least. It would transport me into an Arabian night at once.”

“So it would! What a capital idea! It would be the best fun going. And I say, why should not we have Fortunatus’s purse just for to-night?”

Christabel turned round and stared at him. “Why should not we? What are you dreaming of? Are you by chance the little grey man—and have you got the purse in your waistcoat-pocket?”

For answer Lord Anstice thrust his fingers down into his waistcoat-pocket and drew out a small purse, which he held out to Christabel.

“Try it,” he said, imploringly. “Try if it won’t have a sovereign and a shilling in it as often as you give it back to me to-night. It would be the best joke that was ever acted; do try it.”

“What can you mean? You don’t suppose, do you, that I would give away your money in that reckless way? Of course I was only talking nonsense.”

“But I don’t think it was nonsense. You said it was what you would like beyond anything in the world. So why should not you have what you like on one Christmas Eve? It won’t do me any harm, I assure you. It’s—in fact—a windfall that I meant to give away at Christmas—and I believe you’ve hit upon the very best way of doing it. I don’t know what you feel, but I’m in an Arabian night already, and want to take as many other people into it as can come. There—that pale woman with the shawl over her head, and two ragged children hanging on to her skirts, why should not it begin with her?”

Christabel could not keep her eyes from dancing with delight, even while her hand still hesitated to take the purse. To know that this strange feeling of having got out of herself and wandered into a magic world of dazzling delight was not unshared, added another spell, and made her feel that the only safe exit for her excitement was to pass the pleasure on to others.

"You are sure that you are serious, and intend what you are doing? You won't be sorry for it to-morrow, as I am sometimes when a Will-o'-the-wisp of a fancy beckons and I follow it?"

"Not I. I shall look back upon it as one of the best things I have done in my life."

"And there will still be another shilling and sovereign in the purse for yourself when you want them?"

"Oh yes; you need not trouble your head about that. I can make it a Fortunatus purse as far as a sovereign and a shilling go whenever I like."

"Ah, then you must really be a much better artist than I am, whatever you say of yourself," cried Christabel, looking up, with an air of respect that amused Lord Anstice intensely, at the broad forehead shaded by his wideawake, and then at the well-shaped, delicate hand that held out the purse to her. A true artist's hand, she said to herself, then aloud, "If you are really so lucky—but come into the shop with me, and see the delight on that woman's face which Fortunatus's purse is going to buy for us."

Lord Anstice, however, preferred to wait outside, pleading that it was better to avoid attracting the attention of bystanders, and that Christabel could flit in and out among the crowd, and act the fairy benefactor more easily alone. She came back to him when he had waited about ten minutes and was just beginning to tire, with a radiant face, and a look in her wonderful eyes turned upon him, that made him forget he had felt impatient.

"I slipped out of sight while the shopman was counting out the change into her hand. Let us turn down this side-street and lose ourselves in the throng round Punch and Judy as quickly as we can. I have heard all about her. She is a widow with eight children, and goes out charing. She went so far as to remark that she 'had heard of angels,' when I put a whole pound of tea into her lap—but the other things, the oranges and savoury jelly for the child who is ill—and the lavish materials for to-morrow's plum-pudding for the other seven, reduced her to absolute dumbness, and when she finds me vanished, and has to go home with her five shillings change in her hand, her puzzlement will be as

complete as we meant it to be. I know she will tell the six children she left locked up at home that she had a glimpse of wings underneath my cloak and heard them flutter just as she lost sight of me. Oh, and I did not forget the shilling, either. I slipped it into the hand of the eldest child to secure his falling in kindly with the angel legend. Fortunatus's purse is quite empty."

"Give it back to me then, and look about in the crowd to see who is to come next."

A hump-backed boy, poorly but decently clad, who, with a big basket in his hand, was hanging on the outskirts of the Punch-and-Judy crowd, took Christabel's fancy now.

"Tiny Tim shall carry the turkey home himself this year," she cried eagerly. "Leave him to me; I have a story ready about a sympathising friend who wishes to send a token of respect and good-will to his parents this Christmas. Ah, there is my token—in the poulterer's shop opposite, tied up with rose-coloured ribbons. His basket is just big enough to hold it. I will catch him, and be back in a minute."

Tiny Tim visited a second shop, and acquired a warm comforter before Fortunatus's purse was exhausted. By the time it was returned to her again, Christabel had fallen in with a tribe of ragged urchins, mothered by a little woman of six, on their way to a sweet-shop to spend a halfpenny, and, after following them to their destination, and astonishing their small minds with undreamed-of abundance in the way of bulls'-eyes and toffy, she carried them off to a ready-made clothes shop over the way, and equipped them in warm jackets, capes, and hats, adding a shawl for mother, who was reported to be coming home from the hospital on Christmas Day. When she gave back the purse at the close of this performance, which had necessitated its being once carried back to its owner in the course of the bargain, and had triumphantly pointed out the transformed tribe trotting homewards, each clutching the other's miraculously whole garment with solemn looks of infantile amazement, it suddenly struck her that time had been passing, though she had not heeded it during these

exciting experiences, and that Katherine must long ere this have begun to expect her at home.

"Yes, it's about time we escaped from these quarters," Lord Anstice assented. "People are beginning to stare, and the next thing that might happen is our being taken up for passing bad money. Fortunatus's purse would puzzle the policeman, and before we could make all clear your sister would have time to think I had fulfilled my promise of taking care of you very badly."

"Let us make haste home, then, and I need not keep you, you know, after we have passed under the railway-bridge."

"Do you think I can't walk as fast as you, or must I tell you again that nothing you can say to me will make me give up a step of the way? I never enjoyed a walk so much in my life, and I have not so many pleasures that you need grudge me the fag-end of this one."

Christabel was silent for a few minutes after this speech. The sentence, "I have not so many pleasures" went to her heart, and confirmed the delightful sense of comradeship that had given such zest to all the events of the evening. Her companion was, she thought, leading just the sort of life she had read of and dreamed about, and that she admired utterly—a generous, free-hearted, careless life—not from recklessness, but from that sense of power to command ultimate success and distinction which supreme genius gives. Self-denying, too, in the midst of power, for it had few pleasures, and they were of this kind. When they had repassed the railway-bridge and were nearing home, she spoke again.

"Ours is not a pleasure that will come to an end when our walk is over; in fact it is, properly speaking, only just beginning now. Tiny Tim has hardly reached home with his basket yet, and our charwoman has not begun to tell her story to the six home children, for I feel sure she turned into a greengrocer's on her way home to spend that five shillings on coals for to-morrow's fire to boil the pudding. There are a good many people who will never forget this evening."

"You may count me for one of them."

"Yes, it has been a wonderful walk. I can do without another for a long time with this to think of."

"But why should you do without another? Miss Moore, look here. I think your sister is right in not liking you to walk about by yourself."

"But that is condemning me to no walks at all, and, luckily, it would be an impossible rule for me to keep. After the Christmas holidays I shall begin to give drawing-lessons again, and some of my pupils live a long way off, on the other side of the park. I shall have walking enough then."

"So shall I. I am going into the country for a week or two on business, but when I am in town I walk about a great deal, and generally across the park. When we meet, it will give you a chance of prolonging your walks without your sister needing to be anxious. You'll let me do that for you sometimes, won't you, after taking such good care of you this evening?"

They had reached Mrs. West's house by this time, and Christabel turned on the doorstep to wish him good-night.

"I don't ask you to come in again," she said, "because it is late and Katherine is tired, but when you come back to London——"

"Precisely, I shall come and settle about those future walks."

"And Katherine will thank you for taking care of me on this one."

"I consider it a promise, however," said Lord Anstice as they shook hands.

Christabel's excitement died away into anxiety, and some doubt about the wisdom of her actions, when she found herself shut into the emptiness of the Wests' front hall. It was Casabianca who had opened the door for her, and he proceeded instantly to enlighten her on various disagreeables consequent on her prolonged absence which he thought she ought to know.

"Oh, I say," he began, "there have been people coming to the door from shops all the evening with parcels for you. They said you ordered 'em, and Mary Ann says you'd better keep a footman to open the door for your purchases, since you've grown too grand to carry 'em home yourself. She wonders who you expected to take 'em up to the attics for you."

"I did not think they would come so soon," said Christabel penitently. "I thought I should get home in time to ask you, Casa, to be on the look-out and take them in for me. It surely is not late."

"Mary Ann meant to keep you standing half an hour at the door to punish you; but I dodged her," continued the boy. "Yes, it's pretty late. Mrs. Urquhart's tea has come out of the drawing-room, and Mildie overheard her telling her maid to inquire whether you had returned and gone upstairs to Miss Moore. Mildie flatly refused to satisfy the old lady's curiosity, I should have given it to her if she had; but, I say, another time you'd better take me out with you to carry home your things. It would be better fun for me than sitting in that stuffy school-room while Mildie does her physics, and I'd bring you home the back way and keep you out of scrapes with Mary Ann."

"Thank you," said Christabel, smiling, as she compared the different kinds of protection that it seemed just now to be her fate to have thrust upon her; "but where are my parcels? You have not let Mary Ann make away with them, I hope."

"Oh no, she only threw them into the lamp-closet, because she said she would not have lodgers' parcels lumbering about the hall; I'll fish them out for you in a minute and carry them up to the top of the house if you'll let me."

Christabel declined his company, under plea of wanting to get upstairs as quietly as possible, and she was conscious of feeling a little sneaky as she passed Mrs. Urquhart's door on tip-toe, to avert the danger of being assailed by the old lady with a shower of questions and remonstrances for having left Katherine alone so long. Had she really been neglecting Katherine for her own pleasure this evening? The strange thing was that a pleasure without Katherine should have been complete enough to make her forget.

If Christabel had been selfish she was punished, for she was not able to make the immediate atonement she had promised herself, of taking Katherine into her pleasure by telling her all about it. Katherine's weary pale face, and the unwontedly querulous tone of her voice as she

asked the cause of her long absence, showed that this was no time to begin a long story, a story too that Christabel felt she could only tell comfortably to sympathising ears in a mood to take its humours in good part. The tale of Fortunatus's purse must wait for another time, and live, as no dream even had ever yet lived, alone in Christabel's memory, without there being a reflection of it in Katherine's.

Christabel told herself that this disappointment was only one more added to the many troubles, great and small, caused by her sister's illness which had first made her know what it was to feel lonely; yet she was unreasonably depressed when she had to lie down by Katherine's side at night, with the unconfided events of the evening lying, as she fancied, like a tract of unknown country between them. The pain of this thought kept coming in and out among her dreams, and mixing in a fantastic way with recollections of the scenes of the evening, till she was recalled from uneasy slumber by the sound of the church bells ringing in the Christmas morning. She sat up in bed, resolved to shake off the vague discomfort to which she had awakened, and as she recalled the night visions to dismiss them, she hardly knew whether to laugh or shudder when she found that the most persistent of them had been one in which she saw herself entreating the companion of her late walk, in the guise of the "little grey Master," to take back his purse in exchange for her shadow, with the loss of which she thought Katherine was reproaching her.

CHAPTER X.

TWILIGHT.

Forth from the spot he rideth up and down,
And everything to his remembrance
Came as he rode by places of the town
Where he had felt such perfect pleasure once.
Lo, yonder saw I mine own lady dance,
And in that Temple she with her bright eyes,
My lady dear, first bound me captive-wise.

CHRISTABEL MOORE's one little bit of Christmas gaiety passed quickly, and for the present seemed to have left no

trace behind it. The owner of Fortunatus's purse did not appear again in Air Throne, or make any further demonstration of himself by token or message, and the intimacy that had sprung up during the Christmas Eve walk began to wear a dream-like unreality in Christabel's recollection, as of something that could not possibly belong to the world of solid outside fact. The more so as Katherine had a slight relapse during the last week in the year, and showed such unwonted symptoms of despondency and anxiety about Christabel's doings, that somehow or other (Christabel could not quite explain it to herself) the story of her Arabian night remained untold. It lay a weight on her conscience, that had never known a reserve from her second self before, and yet a treasure that seemed to grow more precious, more dazzling in dream-like beauty, every time she withdrew herself into the one unshared corner of her mind where its remembrance was stored, and allowed herself to live over its incidents one by one.

Otherwise the opening month of the new year was a trying time to the two sisters; the first, since they had lived alone together, when their spirits had failed to rise higher than the difficulties that challenged them, and outside discomfort had been allowed to reflect itself within.

Katherine found the mental irritability and weakness attending on her slow recovery far harder to bear than the suffering of real illness, and could scarcely reconcile herself to herself in such a new state, even by regarding it as an enlightening experience for future use. Christabel was sometimes almost tempted to wish for the days back again when her patient lay passive in her hands, so difficult did she find it to restrain Katherine's eagerness to be at work again, without bringing up the depressing question of what was to become of them if two continued to eat while only one earned. Outside helps to forget this vexed question came seldomer and seldomer. Even Mrs. Urquhart went away the day after Christmas Day to spend a fortnight with her married daughter in Devonshire, and the doctor took a fit of shyness or prudence, and, when professional visits were no longer necessary, sent up notes of inquiry by Casabianca, and was as seldom seen by the sisters as before Katherine's accident. The

young Wests came and went as usual, but did not bring much brightness with them. Nothing particular had happened, Emmie explained, when questioned tenderly by Christabel to account for certain red circles that surrounded her pretty eyes once or twice when she came up to Air Throne—nothing new, but—well, it was the beginning of the year, and if Katherine and Christabel did not know what *that* meant in a family like theirs, it was hardly possible to explain. If she must say something, it meant—well, seeing mamma turn pale every time the postman's knock came at the door, and having it always in one's mind that one must be on the watch to intercept dreary-looking letters which, if they fell into papa's hands, brought a look into his face and a tone into his voice that, on account of the effect they had on mamma, must be kept back, at the expense of any amount of vigilance by the rest of the family. It meant, too, the sorrowful looking over of these missives with mamma at a safe time, and the making of all sorts of painful discoveries.

Emmie had not hitherto been very definite in her complaints to the Moores of home troubles, but one day about this time, when she came upstairs with a little glow of angry red on her cheeks that almost put out the traces of tears round her eyelids, she was moved to open her heart to them respecting a source of vexation and anxiety, that had only dawned on herself and Harry after long poring over this year's unpaid bills, though poor mamma had had it weighing on her heart for a long, long time. They (she and Harry) had discovered that papa was not to be trusted with money. No, she did not mean to say exactly that. Mamma would never forgive such words, and Katherine and Christabel must please pay no heed to them, only, alas! they were true. Papa, it seemed, never had, and, they feared, never would, leave off mixing himself up in speculations of the same reckless sort that had ruined him years ago, and in spite of all the experiences he had had, and of all his bitter disappointments, he would still, whenever mamma did not prevent him, keep back part of his salary from her, or intercept the rent of the drawing-room, to make a private fund to invest in some scheme which he always believed would enrich them this time.

"Of course it never does," said Emmie, in a bitter tone that sounded strangely coming from such sweet lips. "Of course nothing does succeed when papa goes into it, and so of course it ends in our growing poorer and poorer, and having longer and longer unpaid bills for mamma to cry over every dreadful January. It is breaking mamma's heart, and even Harry is angry with papa now that he understands the trouble clearly. You don't know what a dreadful feeling it brings into the house when we find that Harry, whom we always looked to, to cheer us, is losing heart at last, so that all our poor little jokes have to be put away, and the school-room is as dull and silent as the other parts of the house. I wonder whether fathers and brothers quite know how hard it is for us women, who have been in the house all day waiting for the evening and planning comforts for them, when they come home too sad and tired to take any notice of what we have been doing? It seems to take all the pleasure and meaning out of our lives. Of course we have always been used to that from papa for years and years, but when Harry's good temper and spirits fail, it is almost impossible for mamma and me to struggle on."

"Poor little clinging air-plant!" said Katherine, somewhat patronisingly, as she tried to stroke the angry flush from Emmie's cheek with her firm, cool hand. "When do you mean to strike down roots into soil of your own, that will make you a little more independent of other people's tempers and doings?"

"I don't know," answered Emmie, who was too much in earnest in her present sorrow to care to change the talk into a discussion of Katherine's favourite theories. "I don't think that even working for myself, or having ever such a grand career of my own, would make me indifferent to papa's and Harry's doings. How could it, when it has come to such a pass with us that we are being ruined by our father, and that Harry, who has always stood up for papa through everything till now, is losing faith in him at last? Oh, I wonder how successful people feel—the clever speculators who gain what the foolish ones lose? I wonder what their houses are like, and how they look when they come back to their wives, and their sons and daughters, and tell them that they are gaining

every day, and putting the possibility of poverty and anxiety farther and farther away from them? Alma could tell me. She knows by this time how the Kirkmans live, and how they behave to each other."

"But you don't envy them?" said Katherine, a little disturbed at the sort of hungry light which came into Emmie's eyes as she spoke the last words. "You don't wish that your father were a successful deceiver, instead of the dupe of other people's cunning? He is very wrong, no doubt; but failure in such a course is a shade better than success."

"Yes," said Emmie suddenly, unclasping the hands she had raised over her head, and relaxing all her strung frame into its usual soft, pliable lines. "Yes, you are right there. I don't envy the Kirkmans—no, I don't. I would not have a splendid house and prosperity that an honest person could not share. I don't put *riches* above *people*, if Alma does. I am only wondering how she has liked her Christmas visit, and perhaps thinking it strange that her new year should begin so differently from mine; that she should be enjoying herself with the winners, while I am finding out all the bitterness that comes to those who lose. Well, Alma may choose the Kirkmans and their splendour, but everyone does not feel like her—not everyone."

Katherine could have wished that Emmie had said she preferred principles to riches instead of *people*, and that the soft light which put out the anger in her eyes had not suggested some new direction, towards which the air-plant was putting out its tendrils, rather than any resolute taking foot-hold on soil of its own, such as she recommended. She let the conversation drop here, however, for she saw that Emmie's thoughts had drifted away into a channel where she had no clue to follow her.

Emmie's fancies were the more tempted to stray towards Alma and her late gaieties just now, because, since the beginning of the year, one or two little incidents had conspired to restore the Rivers family to that prominent place of importance in the thoughts of their West relations, which they had rather forfeited by their neglect before Constance's marriage. Lady Rivers had sent her carriage with an urgent message one day when she was suffering from a severe cold, and caused Mrs. West to

dress hastily in her best clothes, and leave her own home-business at a very inconvenient moment, to go and sit with her sister through one of her idle mornings. Sir Francis too had himself actually called in Saville Street one Sunday afternoon, happily interrupting the weekly repetition of the Catechism by the younger children, and had made Mrs. West's heart flutter with wild hopes by asking various questions about the ages and prospects of the boys, and by remarking that Aubrey (Casabianca) was a well-grown, intelligent-looking lad for his age, and ought to be enjoying greater educational advantages than the school he at present attended seemed likely to afford. And besides—only Emmie in all the family knew the link which made this circumstance a “besides” to the others—Mr. Anstice had taken to dropping in for an hour in the evening at short intervals, and had contrived to make his visits welcome to all the members of the household, as an agreeable lightening of the gloom of this dreary season. Mrs. West pleaded the possibility of late visitors as an excuse for bringing Emmie, Harry, and Mildie into the dining-room for the last hour or so before bed-time, and when Mr. Anstice did come in, they were almost a merry family party. Wynyard drew Mildie out about her studies, and won her heart by giving her a better explanation of an algebraic problem than she had got from Katherine Moore, while professing to share Casabianca's awe of her learning all the time. Once or twice the two Moores were invited to take late tea in the dining-room to meet him, and then, when Mr. West was discovered to be fairly asleep behind his newspaper, they all gathered round the fire, and actually achieved a game of capping verses.

“Just as other people do at Christmas time,” triumphantly remarked Casabianca, who had stolen in against orders, and who endured the verses for the sake of monopolising a seat next Christabel Moore, and preventing Harry from handing her tea-cup. The mirth and the interest he showed in all that went on were thoroughly genuine on Wynyard's part, for he had long been so shut out from any experience of family life as to be grateful for such a chance participation in it as even this; but Emmie was not blinded to the hope which lay

at the bottom of his attraction towards their society, and, with a sad little feeling of self-depreciation, she made it a point of justice with herself to give him each time he came, at some well-chosen moment, the word or two of news about Alma for which she felt sure he was longing. "Of course," she thought, "it is to hear of Alma, not to sit an hour in our dull house, that he, who can make himself welcome anywhere, takes the trouble of seeking us, and laying himself out to please us. It would be cheating him to let him go away without what he comes for." She feared that in taking his wishes thus for granted she was perhaps assuming a closer intimacy than the extent of their acquaintance really warranted, but Alma's name slipped almost involuntarily from her lips on the first opportunity that came, and when once such an amount of private understanding had been established between them, it seemed useless to go back from it. "Yes," she had said, on the occasion of Mr. Anstice's first call after Christmas, when he and she chanced to be standing a little apart from the rest, and he had hesitatingly ventured a remark that tended in that direction—"yes, they did go to Golden Mount two days before Christmas, and they stayed till the end of the first week in the new year. I don't know how Alma enjoyed the visit, and I am afraid I shall not have an opportunity of asking her, for Aunt Rivers took a severe cold in coming home, and is full of anxiety just now about her own health. She sent for mamma, and told her that on account of her illness she should not give the usual Christmas party, to which Harry and I have always been invited hitherto."

"It is rather hard on you, is it not, to lose your share of pleasure because other people have been having too much of it?"

Emmie's face flushed up. Did he think her such a baby, or so ignorant of what was due to her, as to be pleased with the sort of entertainment she met with at Aunt Rivers's house?

"I don't think I shall miss it," she said.

"Well, I am not so philosophical as you are. I used to think those Christmas parties at the Rivers's very pleasant, and I saw you there last year, you know."

"In a corner," said Emmie, smiling; and Wynyard,

reading the mortifying recollections that lurked in the smile, answered quickly:

"Yes, we shared the corner together for a good part of the evening, did we not? You took me in when I was feeling myself somewhat in the shade and wanting someone to countenance me, and I assure you I felt grateful."

A speech, by the way, which won more gratitude and dwelt longer in its hearer's memory than it deserved from the amount of meaning it had for the speaker.

On the next occasion there was more shyness in Emmie's manner when the subject was entered upon, and a look of pain in her eyes which startled Wynyard as showing a deeper understanding of his feelings than he liked to realise, perhaps also a knowledge of something kept back for the sake of sparing him.

"Alma was here to-day," Emmie began, in an interval of a game at "What is my thought like?" which Casabianca had got up. "She came with a message to mamma from Aunt Rivers, and sat in that chair where you are sitting now, talking for nearly an hour to Mildie and me."

"Indeed"—with a visible effort to speak indifferently, and empty his face of expression, "and I hope that your cousin brought you a better account of Lady Rivers."

"Do you care so much for Aunt Rivers? I thought——"

"That I did not like her," interrupted Wynyard, forced to take up his natural manner again through sheer amusement at Emmie's *naïveté*. "Well, let us change that topic then, and turn to a kindred one in which I hope you will allow me to be honestly interested. What prospect is there of Christmas gatherings at the Rivers's for us all?"

Emmie shook her head.

"I don't believe you want to talk about that either. There was nothing said about it, but it is not likely; they are full of other things."

"The splendours of Golden Mount to wit?"

"Perhaps Alma is not really thinking so much about Golden Mount as might be supposed," said Emmie,

answering the look that accompanied the question, rather than his words. "I have often noticed that she talks most of what she cares least about. She said there was a grand show, and that the Kirkmans were better bred people than she expected to find them. Mr. Kirkman himself seems to have made a great deal of Alma, and to have given her a prominent part in the acting and everything, though there were people of much higher rank and consequence of the party."

"It does credit to Mr. Kirkman's discrimination. He is no fool, he knows how to help himself; he is choosing his tools to force his way into society with the same judgment as when he built up his fortune."

"Tools! Alma?"

"It was an irreverent expression. I recall it. Let us hope that Mr. Kirkman has for once met his match, and that your cousin is not going to let herself be made a tool of."

Emmie glanced at her father nodding uncomfortably in his high-backed chair.

"Some *men* are made tools of, I know," she said sorrowfully. "I did not mean that Alma was too wise, only that I did not see how she could be of any use to Mr. Kirkman, who seems to be courted by the grandest people in London. The charade-acting went on for several nights, and Alma enjoyed the magnificent way in which everything was done. She brought Sidney a very beautiful box of bonbons that had been presented to her in some scene she acted in."

"That was a good-natured thought at all events."

"Sidney put it into the fire directly she had gone—I made him," said Emmie, lowering her voice and turning away her head to hide the crimson that tingled to the very roots of her hair.

Then while Wynyard was thinking in some surprise that this soft-eyed grey-robed little girl, who looked so childish and talked so frankly, had stronger feelings and more decided opinions than many more imposing-looking specimens of her kind, she looked up again and said quickly: "Did that paper you wrote against speculation ever get printed after all?"

"Yes, it did, so long ago that I had almost forgotten it."

"I should like to read it."

"Do you interest yourself in social questions so much?"

"In that one I do. I can't help it. I have to think of it every day, and I wish I had not, for it makes me angry with people I ought not to be angry with, and puts hard thoughts in my head, for which I am more sorry afterwards than anyone knows."

Quick-rising tears drowned all the anger in her eyes at the last words, and Wynyard answered kindly: "We all have hard thoughts to repent of now and then. With you they will pass away with the cause that excites them, and they will leave no bitterness behind. We shall soon be allowed to forget the Kirkmans altogether, let us hope. Here is Casabianca coming to ask 'What our thoughts are like.' Let us try which of us can suggest the farthest-away topic from the Kirkmans. Would it be allowable for me to say, 'Miss Emmie West,' and then I should be safe from stumbling upon them again when I am asked for my comparison."

CHAPTER XI.

HORACE KIRKMAN.

Use virtue as it goeth nowadays,
In word alone, to make thy language sweet;
And of thy deed yet do not as thou says;
Else be thou sure, thou shalt be far unmeet
To get thy bread.

At the time of the last recorded conversation Alma herself would often have been glad of leave to forget the Kirkmans, for the consequences of the accepted Christmas visit were spreading into more intricate meshes than she had at all bargained for. One more name on their already long visiting list, one more great house whose crowded entertainments they might swell when they pleased, it had not seemed any great matter at first, but—was it a result of something in the Kirkman character or fortune which doomed them always to swallow up rival interests and swell into colossal bigness wherever they

appeared—it really did seem to Alma now as if this new acquaintance was destined to absorb all their other social ties, and stand out the chief fact in their outside world.

They had been at home some three weeks, but the Kirkman flavour which, as a first result of accepted hospitality, had pervaded their Christmas parties, and overflowed even into the innermost recesses of home life, had not in any degree abated yet. Perhaps some of their old chosen friends were holding aloof in consequence of this new obtrusive element; Alma was not sure, but she felt that somehow or other she was being swept along as in a triumphal procession, or rather involved in the rush of a victorious army on its way to seize the seat of power, and when she perceived that her talents were reckoned on and skilfully used as auxiliary forces in the struggle, she felt put upon her mettle, and could not but take pleasure in proving that she was more than equal to the expectations she had raised. She saw that she had got among people who appreciated her brilliant social talents as they would never be appreciated in the respectable narrow clique to which the Forrests belonged, and into which her mother by much patient struggle had barely got a precarious foothold in all these years. It was a new, more dazzling, more exciting world she was invited to enter, and there were times when its rush and glare and the field for ambition it seemed to offer, captivated Alma's imagination, while at other moments she loathed it all. These last were generally the moments when she felt, as she was now often made to feel, that intimacy or non-intimacy with the Kirkmans was no longer, as at first, a question that her will would have much weight in determining. She had drawn her father into accepting their advances at first, and he had given way with his usual indifference to everything that lay outside his own province, but now he, hardly less than her mother, had fallen under the new influence. He took to admiring Mr. Kirkman as a contrast to Sir John Forrest, and relieved the *pique* which his son-in-law's supercilious dulness constantly provoked, by taking every occasion to launch out in praise of his new friend's shrewd humour, and the rough common sense that made his conversation actually worth listening to.

Luckily for Constance, these tirades were generally uttered in the absence of the person at whom they were aimed, and Alma enjoyed one all to herself through a *tête-à-tête* dinner with her father on the evening of the day when she had called in Saville Street, her mother being confined to bed with a rather serious relapse, brought on by her having insisted on going out to attend a grand concert at the Kirkmans', when her doctor had positively forbidden her to leave her room. Sir Francis confined himself to generalities as long as the servants were present, but when the dessert was put upon the table and he was alone with his daughter, the conversation took a more confidential turn. "Yes," he began meditatively, as he proceeded to peel a gigantic, highly-flavoured pear which had come in a basket of splendid fruit sent from the Golden Mount winter-gardens; "yes, that last talk I had with Kirkman two days ago has almost decided me. You may not like the thought of it, Alma, and I am not sure that it will please the lad himself, but I believe it is the best I can do for him. I am thinking of removing your brother Gerald from college—your mother will tell you what reason I have to be discontented with the bills sent to me on his account this term, though Heaven knows his allowance is ampler than I can well afford to make it—and putting him to some sort of business under Mr. Kirkman's protection. He has brains enough for that, I suppose, though he has not been able to make anything out of his residence at Oxford so far, but an occasion for spending my money. If I had behaved in my youth as your brothers seem to think themselves justified in behaving now, I wonder where I should have been at this moment—certainly not supplying my family with the means of living in luxurious idleness."

"I am afraid Gerald is idle, papa; but do you think he is fitted for business? Would he get on with Mr. Kirkman if he took him into partnership?"

"Took him! Mr. Kirkman! Your head must be turned indeed, Alma, to entertain such a notion. Millionaires like Mr. Kirkman don't take idle lads like Gerald into partnership so readily. No, I am not thinking of any such close connection; I am not even sure it would be desirable for Gerald, but Mr. Kirkman's affairs have

ramifications in many directions, and he has suggested several possible steps that might be taken for establishing Gerald where his influence would tell immensely in opening the way for him. He is very downright and plain-spoken, a little premature perhaps in stating his wishes and explaining his motives for offering help, but as for partnership,—Gerald, at all events, is not the member of our family he would choose to confer that distinction upon, if he had it in his power. He is too good a judge of what is worth having for that.

Alma would not see the look of amused intelligence her father directed towards her as he finished his sentence, though she felt it, and to turn back the conversation from the dangerous direction it was taking, said quickly:

"I always thought you hoped to get some Government appointment for Gerald if he failed at Oxford. Everyone says you have so much interest!"

"And that I have strained it to the last tug it will bear. Don't you remember the remarks in the papers when Frank was sent out to India, remarks, by the way, which he seems bent on justifying just now. No, no, Alma; I have stretched my conscience too far already on Frank's and Melville's behalf. A public man who has the misfortune to have half-a-dozen fools for his sons, should know when to stop in pushing them, unless he means to sink himself and all his belongings together. There have been instances enough of fair reputations ruined in that way; I don't want to swell the number."

Alma made no answer. Her father had got upon the one topic—his sons' incapacities—of which he ever spoke with bitterness, and she knew that if he were not contradicted, his usual cheerful disposition to make the best of things would soon reassert itself. There was a little pause, and then with a sigh which seemed to dismiss a mountain-load of disappointment he went on:

"Well, I suppose there is a great deal of give and take in the way in which this world's affairs are managed. One must not expect to have everything to one's mind. If I had been a weak-minded unlucky old potterer like poor West, for example, I daresay I should have had energetic clever children to work for me, and take a

great deal more account of me than if I had been the making of them. As it is, I suppose I must just broaden out my shoulders to carry the whole kit of you on to the end!"

"Papa," said Alma, whom this comparison with the Wests touched to the quick, "will you tell me exactly what you mean to-day? Are you thinking that *I* could do anything?"

She rose as she spoke, walked to the end of the table where he was seated, and stood behind his chair, putting her arms round his neck. He turned back his head to look up at her, the cloud quite gone from his face, and a playful affectionate smile hovering round his lips and in his eyes.

"Am I getting *so very* feeble," he asked, "that you suggest your white shoulders as a substitute for mine? No, no, my child. Here, sit down quite close to me that we may talk out our case comfortably together. If I know myself, I have nothing in my mind about you, beyond a wish that you should do what is best for yourself, and what you *like* best, in any decision you may be called upon to make soon. Of course with a needy clique like ourselves, if one gets very considerably up in the world, it gives a hand to all the rest; but I was not making you the subject of any vicarious ambitions, I assure you. Don't imagine that I am making an appeal to you for help; my arm feels strong enough yet to pull all my belongings through, even if they continue to be such a dead weight behind me as Frank and Melville and Gerald have contrived to prove themselves this last year."

"But it is very hard on you. I wish—Oh, how I wish——"

"That heads could be changed," said Sir Francis, drawing his hand knife-wise across Alma's slender throat. "If we could just take off this head with all there is in it, and put it on Frank's shoulders, there might be a chance of a judge's wig for it some day, while his straight features and crisp black curls and company-smirk would do very well for the head ornament of a petticoat balloon, would not they?"

"Do you mean," said Alma, drawing back her head

a little hastily, "that you quite despair of my being of any use—any satisfaction to you as I am; won't you condescend to want anything from me?"

"Only that you should be happy, and not make any mistake in your start in life. I don't deny it is a mortification to me that none of your brothers seem in the least likely to make a figure in the world, or that I should not be glad to see the one child who can sympathise with me, in a position where the little bit of wit she has perhaps inherited from me could be shown to advantage. I thought Agatha had brains once, and that she would be a pleasure to me, but she chose to bury herself in a convent, and I gave my consent rather than thwart her, and I will be equally indulgent to you all. If you choose to stick yourself in a corner, or even to bring another impracticable upon me in the shape of a pseudo-social reformer we wot of, I won't grumble, but—well, I will be candid with you, child, to-night, as you ask it—the other thing would make me happier."

It was early days to speak about that "other thing," for though Alma and everybody about her had seen it hovering nearer and nearer for some weeks, no shape of words had, as yet, been given to it, so far as Alma's knowledge went. Her father must then know more than she did; Mr. Kirkman must have been speaking to him about his son's feelings—no, intentions—the idea of Mr. Kirkman speaking about *feelings* was too absurd. The discovery did not make Alma blush—the subject had for her no possibility in it of calling up a blush, but her heart stirred with a strong emotion, which might be fear or elation, but which was due chiefly to the thought of the consequence she might be to her father. She said nothing more, but drew a dish towards her and began silently to pick out the choicest specimens of Golden Mount fruit to take upstairs to her mother, Brobdingnagian grapes of the rarest flavour, and yellow bananas with no flavour at all, but which her mother liked to eat because they had ripened in hot-houses that were the wonder of the country round for the skill and expense it cost to keep them up to the pitch of perfection Mr. Kirkman required in all his belongings.

"Papa," she said, as her fingers laid the last bunch on

the pyramid she had been building, "did you ever read 'Patronage'?"

"A novel of Miss Edgeworth's? Why, yes, I think I did, to your mother on our wedding journey. There is a bad lawyer in it, is there not, who is always trying to hook his children on to someone else. Were you pointing a moral at me, my dear? I don't feel very guilty!"

Before Alma had time to disclaim, a servant entered and gave a visiting-card to Sir Francis Rivers.

"Horace Kirkman to inquire after Lady Rivers. You can show him in here to me, Preston." Then as the servant left the room and Alma rose to carry off her fruit, Sir Francis added:

"That young man is a frequent visitor, certainly, but I can put up with him, he has something to say for himself. Old Kirkman is a luckier fellow than I am; he has only one son, and he has contrived somehow to give him a good deal of the polish that a rise in the world makes desirable, with hardly any diminution of the pluck and energy that built up his fortune. There must be some satisfaction in sending an improved edition of oneself into the world to carry on one's work."

"Papa," said Alma, smiling, "you forget that you are a Lord Justice, and must not condescend to turn advocate again. When you first saw Mr. Horace Kirkman, I remember you said he was nothing but a frank, overgrown Eton schoolboy."

"Yes, but one of the right sort, with what the Americans call grit in him, and plenty of force and determination, so as to be all the better for growing up slowly. I hate your *blasé* old men of twenty-two, and am not overfond of world-philosophers of twenty-six either. But what am I about? You must not misunderstand me, child, I make no pretension to overrule your judgment. You are going up to sit with your mother now, I suppose? Do as you like, *just* as you like, about coming down to the drawing-room again this evening."

"I shall certainly come back, papa, if mamma can spare me, and relieve you by the time you have had Alpine climbing and athletics enough to send you to sleep," said Alma, who was more deeply touched by the look of tender consideration, almost of deference, that

accompanied her father's last words than she could have been by any amount of persuasion. She paused and stooped to kiss his forehead before she left him, though she felt that the action and the promise she had just given were first steps in yielding a great deal more than she had as yet quite made up her mind to yield. The consequence of this delay was that she came upon the hastily-entering visitor in the doorway with her dish of fruit in one hand. "An improved edition of the elder Kirkman——, yes, certainly her father was right there," Alma thought, as she raised her eyes to a sunburnt bluff face, that was just then one smile of delight at seeing her, and yielding her disengaged hand to a shake that would have been boisterous if the giver of it had not felt a sudden check—a touch of wonder and tenderness, awakened by the contrast between his rough, red palm, and the "white wonder of a hand" that lay in it.

"You are going away already, Miss Rivers?" he exclaimed in a tone of vexation. "Can't I carry those things anywhere for you? No—to Lady Rivers, you say, and I should disturb her; too clumsy, in fact—but what am I good for, but to fetch and carry for you? You will come back, though, won't you? My people are gone to the opera to hear Patti, and I gave up going with them to come here, hoping you would sing that song to me we talked about last night. I have got it here in my pocket, just let me show it to you."

"You had better have gone to hear Patti," Alma said, mentally registering a vow never to mention anything she could be supposed to desire to a Kirkman again, for fear of having it thrust upon her. "However, I will come down to the drawing-room by-and-by, if mamma can spare me; she is not very well to-night."

Lady Rivers was dozing when Alma got upstairs, and she had time for a good deal of thought as she sat by the bedroom fire, waiting till her mother was ready to talk to her. She covered her face with her hands to shut out even the subdued light of the fire, while she mentally went through her late conversation with her father word by word, but no idle tears streamed through her fingers on this occasion; she was too much in

earnest in her thinking now to take the tear-provoking, sentimental view of the question she had to determine. She wished the crisis had not come so soon, she wished people would let her alone, just till some sore places in her mind—or heart, was it—were more nearly healed; she wished vaguely that all the good of a woman's life did not depend on decisions that were thrust upon her, not brought by her own will, or at her own time; she wished that it were possible to wipe out whole pages of memory and leave them clean and blank for fresh writing. Looks, tones of voice, the remembrance of long talks on summer evenings, or in nooks by Christmas fires, when thought, too quick for words, leaped out to meet thought—if these were to fit in with nothing that matched them in after life, what a constant ache their memory would be! How hard to bear the gnawing hunger to look at them again which must never be satisfied, never! If such recollections could be washed away, burned away, by any alchemy, if memory were a live thing, and could be made to drink molten gold like Crassus, and be suffocated by the draught—then—then her father's wishes might have some reason in them, and a life satisfactory enough might be now opening out before her.

From this point her thoughts became less collected, and merged into a succession of pictures of herself in contrasted situations, beneath each of which she mentally wrote the words "bearable" or "unbearable." And all the time it never occurred to her that it was mainly of herself she was thinking, of her own importance to her father, of the way in which her own family and friends would esteem her, of the possibility of forgetting and ceasing to suffer, of the sufficiency of the lot she might choose to her own requirements, as bringing her the manner of life most congenial to her tastes. She fancied she was preparing for an heroic sacrifice, but the subtle poison of self-regard lay under all her thoughts and purposes, putting the true womanly instincts, the enlightening intuitions of real self-forgetting love, far away from her.

Lady Rivers woke up before anything like a resolution had grown out of these cogitations, and Alma had to apply herself to the task of soothing away the fretfulness that usually attended her mother's awakening.

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Lady Rivers did not make such a tractable invalid as her sister, Mrs. West, who had gone through a long apprenticeship to suffering of one kind or another, and who could not afford to make much of small ailments.

Lady Rivers's invalid mood vacillated between a desire to claim all the pity and consideration from husband, children, and friends which the rare occurrence of her illness called for, and the revulsion she felt when their concern grew real enough to rouse thoughts of her own danger, and drive her to frantic efforts to prove to herself that her health was as good as it had been years ago. Having been reassured about her condition by her doctor just before she slept, she awoke in the fretful, complaining state of temper.

"No, I have not had a comfortable rest," she said, when Alma came to the bedside to offer the fruit she had brought upstairs. "I must have closed my eyes just as you came in, for the dinner-hour seemed very long, and I could hear your voices whenever the dining-room door opened. Your father must have been talking all the time very amusingly, I daresay, as he never does when I'm downstairs—I've observed it hundreds of times, you need not contradict me, Alma—you and he will get on very well together, and settle the affairs of the family all your own way when I am quite laid aside. No one will miss me, I daresay, but my poor Gerald, whom your father is so hard upon. He has been complaining of Gerald to you, perhaps."

"Hardly that," said Alma, "and indeed, mamma, you should not allow yourself to grow low-spirited. You will be as well as ever, and among us again in a few weeks, if you will only be prudent. Dr. Urquhart told you so this afternoon, now did not he?"

"Yes, but after all, Dr. Urquhart is only a young man, whom I was induced to call in because your Aunt West tells me such astonishing things of his skill. I hope he is not making a mistake about me. There is consumption in my family, and I was quite shocked to see how thin your poor Aunt West looked when she called here the other day."

"But you are not thin, mamma, happily."

"I am sure it's a wonder I'm not, when you think of

all there is to harass me. Your father's displeasure against Gerald, and your intractable temper, Alma, that will make you, I know, go against my wishes whenever a chance arises of something I should particularly like, happening to you. I say nothing of the miserable separation from Agatha, nor of my disappointment at seeing so little of Constance, that really she might almost as well have married young Lawrence, and gone out to India, for any comfort she is likely to be to me now. Your Aunt West is luckier than I am in keeping her children about her, and getting them to behave affectionately and dutifully at home. I often think how nice it must be for her to have a cheerful-tempered daughter like Emmie, whom she feels justified in keeping always at home to wait on her, because there are no other prospects open to her but just to make herself useful in her own family."

"If you could reconcile yourself to such prospects for me, mamma, I should only be too glad," Alma said, not quite truthfully, as her conscience told her the minute she had spoken. "At all events, let me stay to-night and read to you; there is nothing I should like better," she added, feeling perfectly sincere now. It really did come like a reprieve to her, to escape a return to the guest in the drawing-room, and that nice adjustment of manner between repression and encouragement which her present vacillating turn of mind rendered necessary.

The book Alma took up was a volume of religious meditations adapted to a time of sickness, left by Mrs. West the week before, and every sentence she read sounded like a sarcasm to Alma as addressed to the invalid on whose behalf she was giving expression to counsels of submission and detachment from earthly cares. Possibly Lady Rivers only heard the musical cadences of Alma's voice flowing evenly on, without taking in much of the meaning of what she read, for she was apparently listening all through the lecture, for indications of movement in other parts of the house. Presently she lifted up her head quickly.

"The dining-room door opened just now, and I thought I heard two sets of footsteps going up to the drawing-room. Is not your father alone to-night?"

"Mr. Horace Kirkman came in just as I was leaving the dining-room with a message of inquiry for you from Mrs. Kirkman. I forgot to tell you."

"Forgot,—really, Alma, I have no patience with you; and you sit here as if you did not know you were wanted in the drawing-room. Of course you must go at once."

"Not if you would like me to stay, mamma. Let me at least finish this chapter about illness being a call to renounce worldly-mindedness, which Aunt West, you see, has scored with double lines all down the page."

"My dear, what nonsense! What does all that signify when Horace Kirkman is waiting downstairs to see you? You can send Ward to me, or if she is still at supper, I don't mind being left alone, not in the least, when you are so well occupied. I would not keep you from Horace Kirkman on any account. Kiss me before you go, however, Alma. You may not think it, but I have done the best for you all that I knew how, ever since you were born, and I never mind being neglected or anything when it's a question of advancement for any of you."

Alma gave the kiss required, shut up the book of devotional essays whose teaching seemed so very wide of the mark just now, and went downstairs.

"It was true," she said to herself on the way, quite true. It was *her* advancement that both her parents desired, only that. They wanted her to have what they cared most for, and had prized most themselves. Why should she feel indignation against them when she perceived the manœuvres that thrust advancement nearer and nearer to her? Did she not, at the bottom of her heart, or if *heart* was the wrong word, of her *mind*, desire it for herself? Was it not her chief good too? She was still in a contradictory, uncertain mood when she reached the drawing-room, and she resisted all Mr. Kirkman's efforts to induce her to try the music he had brought for her. She would hold on to the privilege of playing music of her own choosing and purchasing for some little time longer, at all events, she thought; and besides, a *tête-à-tête* at the piano would have reminded her too closely of another evening's *tête-à-tête*, whose incidents and emotions she had no desire to dwell upon just then.

To break the spell she placed herself as far from the

piano as possible, under the full light of a chandelier, and armed herself with a large embroidery-frame, which she hoped would convey a hint of unapproachableness that a person of the smallest sensitiveness would not fail to interpret. But Mr. Horace Kirkman was not sensitive in the least degree. If she would have consented to sing to him in a far-away corner of the room he would have liked it, but since that did not please her, he was almost as well content to sit astride a drawing-room chair planted as immediately in front of her as the embroidery-frame permitted, and crossing his arms on the back and propping his chin thereon, to look at her and talk at his ease without fear of interruption. It was true that he had plenty to say for himself, and not altogether foolish things either. Alma looked up from her work at the end of any sentence that chanced to call for an answer, (monologue about his own affairs was Mr. Horace Kirkman's habit rather than conversation), and met sensible eyes full of admiration and liking fixed unfalteringly on her. There was no shy reverent veiling of feeling in them, for she was not a mystery or an ideal to him, and carried no halo of unapproachable purity and glory about her head; she was just a beautiful, stylish woman, whom he liked heartily, and thought every way fitted to share the successful jolly life he meant his to be, and he did not much care how soon or how late she understood him, being pretty confident of getting what he wanted in the end. The big, strong, self-assertive face, full of blunt common sense and directness of purpose, would, no doubt, Alma allowed, have been attractive to some women, for to some it might even have realised their highest ideal of a desirable lord and master to whom a submissive life might be dedicated. To some women, perhaps, but not to her: she might take him for her own, she would have to bow down if she did take him, she would have to grow to his likeness in the end contentedly enough, perhaps, but such taking would always be, to her conscience, a distinct choosing the world—the world instead of something else, some vague ideal that might have been better, though her eyes were not purged enough to see it clearly, and become out-and-out enamoured of its beauty. Here Alma had to look up and smile at the point of an anecdote Mr. Kirk-

man had just finished, relating to some adventure of his own in foreign travel; and she managed the necessary smile, not very meaningly, perhaps, but with quite expression enough to satisfy her present companion, and then, looking down, she resumed her reflections, which gradually crystallised into something as like a purpose as reflections of this kind usually produce.

She resolved that she would not allow herself to be hurried into an irrevocable promise to Horace Kirkman, but at the same time she did not determine to set herself seriously against the current of events that were, she knew, bearing her steadily on to that point in the end. She was not strong enough for such a course, not sure enough of her own wishes, or, she said to herself, of the real wishes of that other person whose want of determination to win her as she wished to be won, was perhaps the real grievance that lay at the bottom of her vacillation, and of the dull fire of pain and indignation she was trying to trample out into dead ashes in her heart. What justice there might be in giving this dead heart in exchange for the honest liking she thought of appropriating she did not ask herself; and she dismissed the question with a reflection that a Kirkman might surely be trusted to look after his own interest and get of everything he wanted as much, or more than he deserved.

CHAPTER XII.

ROUND THE FIRE.

Let others seek for empty joys,
At ball or concert, rout or play;
Whilst, far from fashion's idle noise,
Her gilded domes and trappings gay,
I while the wintry eve away;
"Twixt book and lute the hours divide,
And marvel how I ere could stray
From thee—my own fireside.

LADY RIVERS's covetous longing after Emmie West as a convenient sick nurse who might, without scruple, be kept constantly in attendance was not a mere passing fancy.

It recurred again and took the persistent shape of an invalid's craving, when a succession of imprudences had brought about a state of health that made Dr. Urquhart speak warningly, and at last obliged Sir Francis to interpose his authority against further trifling.

Mrs. West came often to Eccleston Square, and while Alma was driving or visiting with the Kirkmans, spent long mornings and afternoons shut up in her sister's close dressing-room, and then went out into the cold January air to make her way back to distant Saville Street, and reached home exhausted and shivering, to the loud-spoken indignation of Emmie and Harry, but to the silent satisfaction of Mr. West, who, from the depth of his present humiliation, saw a possibility of advantage in this renewal of the intimacies of old times.

Mrs. West was companion enough for her sister as long as actual suffering lasted; her soft voice and sad eyes and resigned phrases were felt by Lady Rivers to be the best safeguards to have about her so long as she was obliged to admit the shadow of a distant dread into her thoughts; but when she began to think she might dismiss that fear to another season, Mrs. West's grey presence was discovered to be a little oppressive.

"Poor Emmeline," Lady Rivers would say to her husband, when he went to her sitting-room a few minutes before dinner to congratulate her on having had her sister's company through the afternoon; "Poor Emmeline is not much of a companion for me now; she never had any spirit, and she has let herself sink dreadfully under her misfortunes: she cannot see that there are a great many alleviating circumstances in her case, though I tell her she really ought to see it. We all have our anxieties, and if I were to look only at mine I should be melancholy enough. The trial of poverty is nothing to the trial of parting with one's children. Indeed, I tell Emmeline that if I could keep a dutiful daughter like her Emmie always with me, I don't think I should care very much for anything else. She confesses that she finds it an immense comfort, and she has promised that I shall have Emmie to stay here for a week or two while I am so closely shut up, and while Alma's

time is too much engaged with visitors for her to be often with me."

"I don't see why Alma should not give up her time to nurse you as well as Emmie West."

"My dear, what are you thinking of? I would not be so selfish for the world. I should be miserable if Alma were shut in here with me in this close room, losing her complexion and everything, just at this time when so much is going on of immense importance to her. I am not selfish."

"Emmie West's complexion is not of any importance then? There is nothing selfish in shutting her up?"

"My dear, we can so easily, in so many little ways, make it up to the Wests. Why, as we are not likely to give dinner-parties till I am about again, I have ordered one of our weekly hampers of poultry and game from Longhurst to be sent to Saville Street, instead of here. Mr. West is a man who values a second course of his dinner, and to be able to give it him is an immense comfort to poor Emmeline I find."

"It balances the loss of her daughter, who is, you say, an immense comfort too, eh? But, my dear, why have you not thought of doing this before, if they really cannot indulge themselves in game, unless it is sent to them? I fancy, if I were to look back, I could find in some corner of my mind recollections of dinners in Saville Street, when the second course was something of a treat to us too. I have no time for such matters, but how is it that you did not think of the game sooner?"

"When we were giving two dinner-parties a week ourselves, it was impossible to spare it; and besides, I always think it is a pity to let such things grow into a habit. They would have depended on its coming every week, and it would have been no particular pleasure or gratification just now."

"When it comes as payment for shutting up poor little Emmie; you are a financier lost, my dear. However, if her complexion is to be sacrificed—it is a very pretty one, by-the-way, and beats Alma's altogether—I think I should like the payment to be of a more durable kind than a few hampers of poultry and game. Our success with our

own sons does not warrant interference with other people's, or we might offer to do something for one of the West lads."

"Yes, something suitable for them, and that would not be burdensome to you hereafter, such as getting a presentation to Christ's Hospital for Aubrey. There is nothing Emmeline would like so well as that."

"You think so,—well, when I can get a moment I will make another pilgrimage to Saville Street and speak to West himself about the boy. If he were not such a sulky brute, and did not take such pains to prove that he can be as insolent to me now he is a poor man, as he used to be when he was rich, I should go there a great deal oftener, and need not feel such a sneak as I do now when I see any of them."

"It's very absurd of you, for I am sure we have always been quite as kind and friendly since their misfortunes as they could possibly expect. And you must not suppose I am not intending to do more for Emmie, if she pleases me, than you know of at present. I have thought of a plan very much to her advantage, which I have no doubt I shall be able to manage, though I don't speak of it till I see a little more clearly how things are tending with Alma."

"Don't let it be a matrimonial speculation, however, my dear. You have a great genius for management, and I assure you I feel a sort of awe of your cleverness, when I occasionally get a glimpse into the intricacies of your plans; but I doubt whether the result, as shown in your daughters' marriages, will be so much better than my placing of my sons, as to make it worth our while to take the guidance of another set of lives into our hands. Let Emmie try her own luck in getting a husband, without your meddling in it."

"Of course I shall not think of anything of the kind for Emmie West at present; I should feel it quite treacherous towards Emmeline, who wants her to be useful at home, and to make herself pleasant to friends who can help her brothers on in the world. It will be time to think of settling Emmie in five or six years, and then, if anything suitable turns up, I'm sure I shall be ready to make her a handsome wedding present—

perhaps I shall give her that set of garnets and pearls I wore when I was presented, which Alma does not like. If she makes at all a decent match, and she is rather pretty, I think I will give them to her; but you may rest assured I have no husband in my head for her as yet. My plan is a very kind one, but the least likely in the world to lead to matrimony."

Ignorant of prospective plans for her benefit, Emmie was just at this moment seated on the hearthrug in Air Throne, whither she had flown on her mother's return from Eccleston Square, to carry to her two friends the astounding news that she had been invited to spend a fortnight with Aunt Rivers, and that her mother wished her to go, but left it to herself to decide.

The tremendous words were spoken, and Emmie clasped her hands round her knees, and looked breathlessly at Katherine Moore's face, waiting for some word to drop from the lips of her oracle that would give the determining weight to one of two opposing inclinations which were struggling for the uppermost place in her mind. She had been nursing an indignation fit against the Riverses in general and Alma in particular, for a whole month, and she was angry with herself for feeling anything but disgust and vexation at the notion of having to spend a fortnight in their company. Yet a certain pleasant surprise at such a recognition of her individuality as was involved in a special invitation from Aunt Rivers, would mollify her prejudices somewhat, and beyond even this lay a flood of eager imaginings about the great unknown world she believed she was now called on to take part in. As Katherine did not speak at once, she put in another subtly-guiding remark to provide against a rash verdict.

"The boys are dreadfully disgusted, of course; but I can't quite make out what Harry really feels. He said at first that he had rather we all went to the work-house at once than turned bit by bit into convenient hangers-on to the Riverses. Yet just as I was leaving the room to consult you, he said he did not see what there was to consult about, for if my going spared mamma, of course I must go, and think nothing of it. But we have our feelings—our principles of inde-

pendence, I mean—eh, Katherine—even we girls, have we not ? ”

“ It seems to me quite a simple matter not involving any principle,” answered Katherine, calmly. “ If your mother wishes you to go, and it will spare her fatigue, why do you hesitate ? ”

“ Stay,” said Emmie, who did not quite like to have her important question treated so slightly, “ you must remember that it is years and years since we have any of us been asked to spend even a night in Eccleston Square. Such a thing has not happened since the—the—great break-up. It is like a new beginning, and we must think what it might lead to. I could not stay at their house without getting to know their friends; perhaps the Kirkmans. If Mr. Kirkman himself—the Mr. Kirkman—were even to speak to me, or offer to shake hands, how ought I to behave to him ? Can I help remembering how often Harry and I have said that we hate him ? ”

“ I thought you had a great talent for putting yourself into corners in Aunt Rivers’s house ? ”

“ For one evening—but a whole week of corners ! It would be very hard. I don’t think I should like that.”

“ Yet your spirit is rising to meet the hardship. I see it in your eyes,” said Katherine, smiling. “ You will go and come back with a budget of experiences. I shall not be surprised to hear that you have talked politics with Mr. Kirkman in your corner, and persuaded him to lend his drawing-room to David Macvie for a temperance lecture.”

“ You are laughing at me, Katherine, and I am very much in earnest,” cried Emmie, covering her eyes with her hands. “ I wish I knew, I wish I knew——”

“ What ? ” asked Katherine. “ Whose thoughts on this important matter are you trying to read in the dark ? ”

Christabel believed that she could have finished Emmie’s sentence, and was mischievously disposed to do so, till she found that the words were likely to come stammeringly from her lips too, just because a certain

name would have to be spoken which she felt it difficult to bring out quite naturally before Katherine. While she hesitated, and as it seemed in answer to her thought, Casabianca thrust his head into Air Throne, and whispered as through a speaking-trumpet:

"I say, look out! Mr. Anstice has called to inquire after Miss Moore, and Mildie is coolly bringing him up to 'Air Throne.' She's got her abominable chemicals spread out on the dining-room table, and she is ashamed, as she ought to be, of a visitor seeing 'em. Shall I stop them coming up?"

It was too late, however; steps and voices were heard approaching through the long dark passage, and Mildred, talking loud to disguise her consciousness of dingy fingers and two large holes burned in the front breadth of her dress, threw the door wide open and announced the visitor.

"He did not want to come upstairs," she explained in an aside nearly as loud as Casabianca's whisper, while Mr. Anstice was shaking hands with Katherine. "He wanted to go away when he heard papa and mamma were both out, but I thought you would all be so dreadfully disappointed not to see him; and I could not take him into the dining-room, because the bladder of laughing-gas has just burst, and the Gentle Lamb has got it into his head, and is jumping madly about all over the chairs and tables."

Mr. Anstice here turned round to challenge Mildie's assertion that he had not wanted to come upstairs, and the lively argument that followed between them gave Katherine occasion to inquire whether Mildie were not bringing some of the laughing-gas upstairs in her pocket, and chased from Christabel's face the shade of disappointment that had fallen on it when her eye first darted past Mildred to the figure emerging from the darkness behind. She had looked higher for the entering face at first, almost up to the top of the low doorway—but, "No"—she said to herself, she had not really expected anyone else to come in. That strange time when *he* used to enter quietly at this hour of the evening had fallen comfortably into a place among her dream-thoughts, and she did not want it to be disturbed again.

Emmie's cheeks too had leave to cool before anyone looked at them ; then Casabianca pulled forward a long narrow box of Katherine's popularly supposed, among the young Wests, to have a skeleton locked up inside it, to supplement the chairs, and they made a circle round the fire and began to talk. Mildred alone possessed herself of Emmie's late station on the hearthrug, in order that, crouched into a mere heap there, she might the better hide the offending hands and dress from public view, while she watched her opportunity for insinuating questions on jurisprudence, a subject she was bent on making Mr. Anstice discuss with her. The conversation took a disappointingly frivolous turn for Mildie's purposes. Mr. Anstice seemed very well content with his seat on the skeleton's box, little suspecting, Casabianca thought with grim delight, what there was beneath him ; and he broke the moment's silence that followed the bustle of settling themselves with another declaration of gratitude to Mildred for bringing him upstairs—

"To the pleasantest room in the house," he said, glancing backward from the circle of red glow round the fireplace to shadowy distances where the window, still uncurtained, cast a glimmer of white light on some papers piled on a table beneath it, and showed, large and fantastic, in a far corner, Christabel's easel, draped in a red cloak she had lately thrown off, and her embroidery-frame, with her hat stuck on one pole. Then looking up at the wreaths of ivy still hanging above the high chimney-piece, where Christabel had put them on Christmas night, he added: "Or any house, I think ; though what makes it so pleasant, and so unlike any other room I have ever been in, it would be difficult to say in a minute."

"I can," said Katherine ; "it is pleasant only because it is lived in and worked in more constantly than other rooms."

"No, that won't do," objected Wynyard, laughing ; "I know you are working women above everything else, but you really must forgive me if I can't let you arrogate all the work in the world to yourselves. I work a little now and then, and so do a few other men, but our rooms don't look like yours. My literary litter is hateful

enough to look at I know. Now why do those brown leaves up there, for example, look as if some one had brought them from the depth of a forest an hour ago, instead of smoke-dried and miserable as in London they undoubtedly ought to look. There must be witchcraft in it."

"Of the broom then," said Christabel, "which we ride for an hour or so every morning, at a time when all the men in London, except policemen and sweeps, are in bed and asleep. If you could see us you would know what a fight with London dust means."

"It braces us for our other fights," put in Katherine, "but our work is not all combat. Christabel forgets to mention her duster, or I think it has been a cambric handkerchief lately, and I believe it has something to say to each leaf and tendril of that ivy-wreath every morning."

Wynyard gave a quick look at Christabel's face, and withdrew his eyes directly when he saw, what he had never seen before, a faint rose colour fluttering up and giving a look as of a summer morning's dawn to a face that generally made one think of moonlight. To cover his curiosity he hastened to speak again—

"Well, I give up the palm of industry to you then. I see you mean to do and be everything at once, and that there is no competing with you in that line; but I won't be made to believe that it is your work I am admiring, when I know I want nothing but to be let into the secret of your play. The real kindness to a poor inferior fellow-worker who gets heartily to hate his own belongings would be, if, having let him inside your sanctuary, you would just forget he is there and go on talking exactly as you did before his intrusion. I know you were discussing something very interesting, for I heard your voices as I came upstairs, and envied you. Can't you go on? To get right into the middle of a conversation and have it go on as if I were not there, has always been a desire of mine since I first began to walk about London streets on winter evenings, and get stray glances into other people's houses before they were closed up."

"Yes," said Emmie, "I know what you mean; the

house over the way always somehow or other looks so much brighter than one's own."

"Except to the unfortunate people who have neither a home of their own, nor one over the way to look into. I have two prospects from my chambers: one is into an immense workroom, brilliantly lighted with gas of an evening, where night and day the printing of a newspaper is going on. I don't despise it for an evening view. The passing backwards and forwards of the dark figures across the windows, that look like furnace-mouths, and the monotonous throb of the steam-engine, which I can feel where I sit, are not bad accompaniments to my thoughts sometimes as I work. My bedroom-window looks across a still narrower street into a long low room, a laundry, I imagine, where three or four women and as many girls stand and wash from morning till night. They come to their work in the early morning just as the night devils are leaving theirs, but I am sorry to say there is nothing angelic in their looks or manners to carry out the contrast. On summer afternoons, when all the windows are open, I have sometimes heard them laughing and talking together; but even that was not exactly exhilarating, and did not inspire me with a wish to explore their interior further."

"And you really don't know anything more about these people?" asked Katherine.

"Angels or devils—does one generally know anything about people divided from one by a brick or so in London?"

"I should have thought you would, since you observe them so closely, and say, as you did just now, that the sights and sounds make an accompaniment to your thoughts when you are writing."

"A kind of irritant that keeps the nervous energy up, that was all I meant. However, I won't deny that I have an acquaintance or two among the devils; but that is all in the way of work, and I was petitioning for play. We don't get any nearer the discussion I interrupted when I came in, which I am in hopes Miss West is going to start again for my benefit this moment."

"Yes, I will tell you what we were talking about," said

Emmie, leaning forward from a low seat in the shelter of Katherine's chair, where she had partly hidden herself, and speaking hurriedly in one of those rash impulses to openness that sometimes seize upon timid persons, "I will tell you, because it concerned people you know very well, and you will understand. Aunt Rivers has asked me to go to Eccleston Square and help Alma to amuse her while she is ill, and we were discussing whether I should accept the invitation or not."

"Discussing the claims of rival duties which press upon this helpful little person," put in Katherine, anxious to stave off the appearance of consulting an acquaintance on a family matter.

"You see, it was not at all interesting," said Emmie, her red lips quivering like a frightened child's now that she had spoken, and the reaction to shamefacedness was coming upon her.

"Very interesting if one were allowed to hear these same *pros* and *cons* which seem to be all duties and to have nothing to say to inclination," answered Wynyard, with a glance of tender admiration at Emmie's shy face, a glance which caused Katherine to recall her champion of the tumultuous meeting of a few months ago.

"I know the sort of talk ; I could tell you all about it, if you'd listen to me," struck in Casabianca disdainfully. "Rubbish about whether this pair of gloves would do to wear again of an evening, or whether that pocket-handkerchief was fine enough ! Now I'll tell you something. One day last year Emmie went to dine at Uncle Rivers's and came back with her eyes red with crying—and shall I tell you why—just because, as she was setting out, I picked her pocket of her handkerchief, and slipped in mine instead, a jolly spotted cotton that had nothing much the matter with it except that it was not useless enough for idiots. Emmie dropped it under the table at dinner-time without knowing it was not her own, and a fool of a footman brought it to her into the drawing-room afterwards, spread out upon a big silver tray. Now need she have cried about such a thing as that?"

"I did not at the time so that anyone could see me," pleaded Emmie ; "but the room was full of strangers,

and Aunt Rivers looked at me and at it. You know the sort of look, don't you, Mr. Anstice? And you would have felt rather queer, with the footman standing straight upright before you, now would not you, if you had been me and had been there?"

"Very queer indeed, like knocking the fellow down if I had been myself and had been there, I'm afraid," said Wynyard hotly, picturing to himself the insolent wooden stare with which Lady Rivers's flunky would perform the feat described, and those lovely wistful eyes of Emmie's falling under it. "However" (recovering himself), "I should in that case have been the greatest idiot there. You need not have vexed yourself. I can testify to there having been schoolboy tricks played in your aunt's drawing-room enough to make her recognise Casabianca's handiwork in that one. She understood all about it, you may be sure."

Emmie shook her head. "She *was* ashamed of me all the same; one knows well enough when one's relations are feeling ashamed of one, and I can tell you it is not a pleasant sensation."

"Certainly not, whether it comes from relations or old friends," said Wynyard, lowering his voice; "you know I have had my share of snubs from the quarter you mention before this. It is not exactly pleasant, but it puts one on one's metal. Shall we make a league together? If you take courage to brave another encounter with Jeames's silver tray—for, mind you, I can't believe that anyone else in that house would be ashamed of you if you were dressed in spotted cotton handkerchiefs from head to foot—I will risk the cold shoulder from the higher powers and, welcome or not welcome, come from time to time to inquire how you are getting on, and to compare notes on our grievances. May I?"

He rose to take his leave as he finished speaking, and Mildie, dreading to lose her chance of picking up useful information, struck into the conversation in her shrill schoolgirl voice, and saved Emmie the embarrassment of answering.

"I think there ought to be sumptuary laws like those in Venice during the middle ages. Mr. Anstice, don't you think it would be a good plan for us to have sump-

tuary laws, to keep rich people from spending their money on footmen and ridiculous lace pocket-handkerchiefs and silver trays that only lock up the specie of the country? It seems to me that sumptuary laws are wanted, and I wish I understood why they did not answer when they were tried in Venice. Do you know, Mr. Anstice?"

Wynyard contrived to escape committing himself on either the historical or the economical problem; and, after a little playful bantering of Mildie on the subject of her indefatigable industry, he took leave, turning back however at the door to ask when Emmie's visit to Eccleston Square would begin. This week or next?

Emmie answered as if it was now a settled matter that the visit should be paid, rather to the surprise of Katherine Moore, who could not perceive that anything had been said during the talk round the fire to set her scruples at rest or throw any fresh light on the subject.

Mrs. West was a good deal troubled when the time came for packing up her daughter's wardrobe in preparation for the visit. She held up garments to the light with many rueful shakes of the head, and stood irresolute for a quarter of an hour at a time with the emergency purse in her hand, anxiously balancing its slenderness against the manifest deficiencies in shoes, gloves, and minor adornments (for the greater wants must not even be thought of) which a review of Eccleston Square dressing requirements made evident. Emmie took the purse out of her hand one day at last and shut it with a cheerful, resolute-sounding snap.

"Never mind, mamma," she said, creeping close to her and laying cheek against cheek, her favourite form of caress. "I can bear it, and I will not have you spend one penny of the poor little bit of emergency money left now on me, for I know what it is to you, darling—heart's blood; and since I can't, like Katherine and Christabel, fill your purse for you, I won't let you take anything out to spare my silliness. Besides, do you know, I think I am going to be *not* so silly. I believe I shall not mind now even if Alma does look surprised at the worn tips of my evening shoes when I show them by accident; or if Aunt Rivers says plainly that she thinks my hat and my jacket, and those dreadful green gloves that have not

worn as well as they ought to have done for the half-crown you spent on them at Christmas, too shabby to wear on a drive with her in the carriage. Perhaps they will save me from having to call on Mrs. Kirkman, and that will be a good thing. Anyway, I have a warm feeling at my heart just now that makes me think I shall almost like to be snubbed about my clothes, and that I can smile over the little sneers that used to make me feel so hot and ashamed. I don't know how it comes, but I believe it will last me all through the fortnight's visit."

"I know how it is, darling. It's just your love for your mother that keeps your heart too warm to feel the slights you choose to bear rather than add to her anxiety. I'm very grateful to you, my darling, for I know it is just that."

Emmie did not contradict her mother, but her fair smooth cheek glowed against the faded one that leaned towards it. She was not *quite* sure it *was* just that herself, yet what else could it be, and where was the use of talking? It was good for all parties that she should be setting forth on this important visit in an independent frame of mind, and there was no need to probe into its cause further.

CHAPTER XIII.

ROSE-COLOURED RIBBONS.

For whom

Grimy nakedness dragging his trucks,
And laying his trams in a poisoned gloom,
Wrought, till he crept from a gutted mine
Master of half a servile shire.

THE heroism with which Emmie had armed herself for her visit appeared at first to have been a little uncalled-for. The anticipated trials did not come, and the disagreeables that cropped up as the days passed on were so unlike those expected that Emmie actually did not discover them to be grievances till the time for bearing them was almost over. She would not be so inconsistent as to complain of being shut up in her aunt's room out of the way of all but distant glimpses of the gaieties going on in

other parts of the house, when she had lately told Katherine Moore that it was the being obliged to go into company that she dreaded. Yet it must be confessed that when the first strangeness of the great house and the many servants was over, such a longing for home would seize her and send her, towards the close of a long afternoon, into such disgraceful fits of yawning, that she was frequently obliged to make her escape from the close, scented atmosphere of Lady Rivers's dressing-room and bring herself into wideawake order again by peering over the balusters to the chief staircase, up which a group of afternoon callers would perhaps be ascending, in full view of Emmie's sleepy disconsolate eyes.

It was very silly, she told herself, to feel disconsolate by about the end of the first week, and to wish, oh, so vehemently, that a flight upstairs or down would bring her to Air Throne, or land her in the regions where she and Mary Ann were accustomed to hold discussions and work out experiments, which gave the dinners and teas that resulted therefrom a better flavour than Aunt Rivers seemed to find in her dainty little meals. Yes, it was very weak-minded to grow home-sick after such a short absence, when another week would bring her back to the old cares and to what she had been used to call the gloom of Saville Street; and with little news to impart to the others, for really, except during the moments of those stolen peeps on to the staircase, anyone might come to the house without her being the wiser, even *the* one person who would come expecting to find Emmie West in the drawing-room, and who might possibly feel a little disappointed at her non-appearance.

One day while Emmie was looking over the balusters, a stout, long-trained lady, with a dazzling bird-of-paradise in her bonnet, suddenly looked upwards, and so evidently saw something in the distant perspective of the winding staircase to arrest her attention, that a tall young man who was following lifted up his face and saw too—only the top of a retreating head Emmie hoped, for, though the first glance had somehow fascinated her and kept her for quite a second staring down into the broad, smiling, good-humouredly inquisitive face that was turned up towards her, she had presence of mind to

dart away before the younger pair of equally good-humoured inquisitive eyes had quite found her out. A sudden suspicion, turned into certainty by a moment's thought, shot through her and caused her to tingle all over. Yes, those were the Kirkmans: the mother and son whose names Aunt Rivers brought forward so constantly in her conversations with Emmie, and introduced even into those gossipy confidences with her nurse, which Alma used to frown upon.

The next day, and the next at the same hour, Emmie cautiously peeped again, just long enough to see the glitter of the paradise feather nodding on the drawing-room landing, then she retreated into the dressing-room, robbed, she felt, of even the poor dissipation of watching the stairs, and devoted herself for the rest of the afternoon to reading aloud to her aunt: somewhat monotonously, it is to be feared, for her thoughts were all the while revolving round and round one point—the possibility, namely, that another caller might come to the house and be shown into the drawing-room while that keen-eyed young man and his smiling mother were talking to Alma. Through a whole chapter of a novel filled with the most thrilling incidents Emmie would continue to see mentally one series of little pictures only. A figure mounting the staircase—the drawing-room door thrown open—and then the change that would come on a certain person's face as soon as a glance into the room had made him aware of its occupants. Next she wondered how it would be if, instead of being shut up here, she were seated down there, say by the fireplace, or in the window recess; would the new-comer, for want of something else to do, stroll up to her, and should she be able to say anything to soften the disgust and pain she could picture so surely on his face.

But it was only in the afternoons, during the hours when afternoon tea and callers prevailed in the drawing-room, that Emmie was guilty of monotonous reading aloud, or indeed of any other symptom of want of sympathy with the invalid who claimed her attention. On all other occasions she proved a most agreeable sick-room companion, and had only herself to thank if Lady Rivers found so much pleasure in her society that she could not

bring herself to forego it even for an hour or two. It was sheer selfishness that caused her imprisonment, for Lady Rivers was too much engrossed just then with her own ailments to notice the unfashionable make of Emmie's winter dress: she only kept her shut up because such a listener as Emmie was too great a boon to be shared with anyone who did not need the comfort of sympathy as much as she did.

It was something quite new to Lady Rivers to talk about her troubles to a person who looked up with interested instead of critical eyes, puzzled perhaps but still believing, and in spite of past prejudices, Emmie was such a person. Her nature was so essentially sympathetic that while Lady Rivers talked with her accustomed eloquence of complaint she could not help being mesmerised into an answering feeling of compassion. Possibly, after all, it was a worse state of things to live in a great, plentiful house, where everybody, from its master to the youngest of the servants, occupied themselves mainly in spiting and thwarting the mistress, in the fashion Aunt Rivers described, than like her mother to be struggling against the spite and thwarting that came from an empty purse only. Certainly her mother found less to say about her grievances and fewer people to feel bitter against. Poor Aunt Rivers!

And when Emmie tried her hand timidly at condolence, and brought forward, by way of tonic, stoical maxims learned from Katherine Moore, the conversations still flowed on amicably enough. Her velvety brown eyes quite melted with pity and sweetness as she spoke, and it never occurred to Lady Rivers that Emmie West could be recommending contempt of riches, or indifference to the good things of this world to *her*. In her own opinion she stood secure on an eminence of aristocracy that involved obligations of its own, and she could listen to moralities, applicable to persons whose inferior station in life laid a different order of duties on them, without the least stirring of conscience.

Contentment was no virtue for *her*, who had always found she could gain any point she set her heart upon by worrying long enough, though it might shine sweetly as a grace in people who mismanaged their family affairs as

poor sister West had done. It was, however, gratifying to find virtue in its right place, and Lady Rivers would put out her white jewelled fingers, and reward Emmie's hesitating little sermon with a pat on her cheek, or a caressing touch of her hair, while Emmie wondered and glowed with gratitude, and felt almost as strangely distinguished as if she had seen the stone statue in the square gardens come down from its pedestal, and hold out a welcoming hand.

"That child is really wonderfully pretty," Sir Francis remarked one day, after Emmie had left the room when he had come in and surprised one of those beaming looks of gratitude on her face. "I don't wonder at your keeping her hidden away here, my dear, if, like Madame de Sévigné, you hold to your reputation of mothering *la plus jolie fille à marier* in the market at present. You have never met Madame de Sévigné you say, and don't know her daughter; that is your loss, my love, and perhaps also hers, for I think she would have written a very pleasant letter about you if she had had the luck to know you. No, she is not a *person* who has been putting notions into my head about Emmie West. I spoke simply from my own observation, and I am sorry that it differs from yours, for, proud as I am of Alma, my conscience will never let me say that her nose is as well formed, or her complexion so good as her cousin's, now I have remarked the difference. However, as you find Emmie West's looks only tolerable, don't you think that you might allow her a little more liberty, and show your confidence in Alma's supremacy by venturing the other into the drawing-room sometimes? It would be only common humanity, and might be indulged in without much risk, I should think. Horace Kirkman is too far gone in infatuation for Alma's grey eyes to be disturbed by those pretty brown ones of Emmie's, unless I am much mistaken, and if he could be so disturbed, I think we could all survive his defection. Your suspense would be over, at all events, and you could betake yourself, with Alma, to the south of France, where Dr. Urquhart urges me to send you till the spring winds are over in England. You would be free to go then without being reproached by your maternal conscience for taking your daughter out of

the way of a splendid match, to promote which you have, I am afraid, been perilling your life all the winter."

This remonstrance was, presumably, repeated afterwards in some less irritating form, and enforced by conjugal arguments, to which Lady Rivers succumbed. The next morning Emmie found herself released from attendance, and had the agreeable choice offered her of accompanying her uncle in the carriage to his law court, and of visiting a circulating library on her way back to select a fresh supply of novels for her aunt's afternoon reading—dissipations not to be despised by a young person to whom a drive even in a street cab was a distinct pleasure, and who had, moreover, a hazy kind of interest in law courts, having given a few moments sometimes to wondering how "people" looked in wigs and gowns whose faces without the wigs had become a standard of pleasantness. Did it alter a person much—would a friendly face in a wig look old and dignified, and could one reasonably expect such a one to be just going in, or just coming out, of that legal temple before which Uncle Rivers's carriage would draw up? Might one even venture to shake hands with a friend in a wig, and explain to him how one was situated with respect to afternoon callers?

Sir Francis Rivers did not interrupt a careful reasoning out of these problems by any ill-advised attempts at conversation during the rapid progress of the brougham which conveyed himself and his niece through "miles of London." He had come out of the house and put himself into the carriage with that peculiar expression on his face, hair flying, eyes fixed, lips working without any corresponding sound proceeding from them, which had inspired Casabianca with the notion of drawing a likeness of his uncle, as "Johnny Head-in-Air," and through the hour's drive there might just as well have been a bundle of rags on the seat opposite him as Emmie West for any impression conveyed to his mind by her presence. No need to care how shabby one's hat and jacket were in a drive with Uncle Rivers. The cessation of the motion when the brougham drew up did not bring Sir Francis down from the clouds all at once. He seized a bundle of papers, threw himself out, and was bustling down a long

passage, which Emmie searched with her eyes in vain, when something seemed to stop his course suddenly. He turned round and came back to the carriage, "Johnny Head-in-Air" no longer, but that other edition of Uncle Rivers, whose keen glance, critical or kind, seemed to go down to the bottom of one's mind, and read one's thoughts.

"My child," he said, "I have not given James any orders where to drive. You must tell him yourself where you would like to go. Now you are out for the morning, you will be disposed for a little shopping, no doubt. Girls always want to buy ribbons or something, and I dare say you forgot to bring your purse out with you. There, tuck that into your little glove, and say nothing about it to anyone, but tell James to take you where you can spend it as you like."

He was gone quite to the end of the dark passage before Emmie had had presence of mind to smooth out the transparent bit of paper, whose crisp touch was so unfamiliar to her. It was actually a ten-pound note, and for the first moment or two the almost awful sense of responsibility in having to deal with such a sum brought Emmie more fright than pleasure. Ribbons, indeed! What could Uncle Rivers be thinking about? Did he know what he was doing, or ought one to keep the note untouched and remonstrate at dinner-time? A recollection of the half smile that played round his lips when he said, "Say nothing about it to anyone," was answer enough to this scruple. Perhaps a habit of giving away ten-pound notes inadvertently was one of the peculiarities which Lady Rivers found so trying in her husband.

With this suspicion, Emmie felt a new responsibility laid on her, not to get her benefactor into trouble. It was, moreover, impossible to keep the stately James waiting for orders at the door of the carriage a moment longer; and, on the spur of necessity, Emmie named a shop where Alma had, she knew, been making purchases the day before. During the long drive her tumultuous thoughts had time to settle themselves into a brilliant kaleidoscope picture of delight, her very fears and scruples fitting in as white lights to heighten the colours.

Yes, yes; she had been told to spend all this money as she pleased, and she would do as she was bid, and for once supply the wants of the feminine side of the household at home with a liberal hand. Her mother's first, then Mildie's, then her own; and there might even remain, when all these are provided for, something over and above wherewith to buy that Christmas present for Mary Ann, which her mother had been so sorrowfully obliged to omit this year. Here was, indeed, a happy morning's work laid out. Yet the purchasing of her presents, when the time came for it, did not take so long as might have been expected. The wants to be supplied were not by any means fancy ones, and had been discussed between Emmie and her mother so often, that she had no difficulty in making up her mind what to buy. Just the very things they had talked of as needful, but impossible to come by, on many a long, rainy afternoon over their mending. Only, now that she had this money in hand of her very own, Emmie decided that the warm shawl for her mother should be softer and finer and of a prettier shade of grey than they had dared to dream of when they spoke of buying it some day, and that Mildie's new hat and her own might be chosen for once with more regard to what was becoming than to what was cheap—just for this once. The giving her home address as the destination of her purchases caused Emmie to colour violently, and almost tremble in her shoes, for she could not help fancying the shopman looked surprised, as if he knew the house, and thought her lavishness something monstrous. She recovered her equanimity, however, in the satisfaction of choosing one or two pretty things for herself, such as had never been so much as spoken of in Saville Street, ribbons and gloves and bows for her hair, that were to accompany her back to Eccleston Square, and be worn on occasions when she might make them pretexts for a word, or at all events, a look of gratitude directed towards her kind uncle. He might notice her finery and give her one of his knowing smiles, or just as probably he might remain "Johnny Head-in-the-Air" for all the rest of her visit. Anyhow, the interest of having a private understanding about her ribbons with Uncle Rivers, would remain the same. It would be something

amusing to think about, and would make her feel more at home in the house, more like a person whose existence had been recognised outside the sick-room, than she had felt hitherto. That was surely consequence enough to predict for a few yards of ribbon; but Emmie's purchases had a more important part to play than the one she anticipated, and before she had done with them they got twisted round two or three rather significant events, which gave a colour to the remaining days of her visit not altogether their own *couleur de rose*.

The first link of this ribbon-chain was a natural one enough, and was woven under the very circumstances Emmie had foreseen, and on the evening of the important drive. As there chanced to be no guests at dinner that day, and as an old neighbour had unexpectedly come in to sit an hour with Lady Rivers, Emmie was invited to accompany Alma downstairs, and had the pleasure of putting on her brightest set of ribbons, before she had possessed them many hours.

Sir Francis remained silent and unobserving all dinner-time; but when the dessert was put upon the table he woke up, or rather tumbled down from some region of speculation into his own dining-room, and catching sight of Emmie seated opposite, he twinkled a confidential look across the table at her. Emmie thought it was the rose-coloured knots on her bosom and in her hair that attracted his attention and caused him to gaze on her approvingly for quite two minutes; but, perhaps, it was another sort of rose-bloom, deepening and deepening under his gaze, that had chiefly to do with the undoubted pleasure his kindly eyes expressed. To save herself from appearing conscious, Emmie tried to turn her attention to the business of choosing from the fruit Alma offered to her, something that could not possibly have come from Golden Mount. On former occasions, when she had dined downstairs, no one had noticed her curious preference for the least inviting fruits on the table, but to-day Sir Francis was watching her closely, and he exclaimed at the result of her long deliberation:

"What are you thinking of, child? Why you have picked out the only pear in the dish that is not worth eating. Where are your eyes? Let me choose for you."

"No, thank you, uncle; I like the little pears best—I do, indeed!"

"Ah, you have never tasted a Golden Mount monster! It combines all the fruit-flavours in the world, from pine-apples to strawberries. Come, pass the dish! I will pare one, and you shall divide it with me."

"No, thank you, uncle. Please, don't! I had rather not, *indeed!*" said Emmie, feeling that Alma was looking at her, and hardly knowing the amount of unnecessary earnestness and resolution she put into her second indeed.

"Hallo! What's the matter?" cried Sir Francis, greatly amused. "Is it a fast-day, or is this some pretty little penance we have imposed on ourself, eh?"

"Yes, what is it, Emmie?" said Alma, in a low, slightly scornful voice, which somehow put Emmie on her mettle.

"I don't want to eat any of Mr. Kirkman's fruit, because——"

"Well, my dear, go on, because——how has Mr. Kirkman been so unlucky as to offend you?" asked Sir Francis.

Emmie's courage was ebbing fast, so she stuck to her first beginning.

"Because it would be sharing the spoil, and I don't think one ought to do it."

"Emmie has got hold of some of the popular prejudices against Mr. Kirkman," observed Alma; "she does not of course know anything about him."

"I do," said Emmie, looking full into Alma's eyes; "I understand a great deal more than you think."

Alma's eyes fell under something she read in Emmie's; and Sir Francis, a good deal surprised, continued the conversation.

"I did not know you were a politician, or a political economist, my dear. You can't really know anything about Mr. Kirkman's ways of making money. I don't suppose you have ever heard a single fact of his life."

"I know one thing," said Emmie, her voice trembling between timidity and indignation. "Mamma, who knew him long ago, told me that when he was managing a mine in the neighbourhood where she lived then, he used to pay the people who worked for him in goods instead

of money, and that he cheated the women and children by selling them bad food. I think these great pears and grapes of his that are made out of all those people's hunger ought not to taste well to him, and I should not like to help him to eat them."

There was a moment's awful silence after Emmie had ended her eloquent speech. Alma picked up one of the big pears, which Sir Francis had half drawn out of the dish, and restored it carefully to its former position in the pyramid of which it had formed a part, and Sir Francis drummed with three fingers on the knuckles of his left hand, smiling all the time as if he was determined not to let himself be embarrassed by what a pink and white faced chit, like the one before him, could say, and yet had not a crushing answer ready.

"Ah, there is Horace Kirkman's knock at the front door," he said at last. "He takes it pretty much for granted that he is welcome to spend his evenings here—that young fellow. Emmie had better run up quickly to mamma, I think, for if she and Horace Kirkman meet while she is in this red hot state, we shall have a new version of the battle between the 'doves and the cranes' enacted on the premises."

Emmie did not wait for a second permission to escape, but she felt very miserable as she untied her rose-coloured ribbons in her own room before going to her aunt, to read aloud to her for the rest of the evening, while Alma played and sang in the drawing-room to Horace Kirkman.

Had she been very ungrateful? Had she taken more upon herself than she had any right to do, for, after all, what business was it of hers, if Alma chose to marry Horace Kirkman? Of one thing she felt certain—she had offended Alma, and must not expect anything but cold looks and distant words from her during the rest of her visit to Eccleston Square. For this she could not help grieving. Alma had shown her many little acts of kindness lately, and however hard she tried, Emmie could not live for ten days in the same house with her cousin, without falling so far under her fascination, as to care a great deal about the sort of looks she had from her. The surprise was all the sweeter, when quite late that evening,

just as Emmie had taken the last pin out of her hair, there came a little tap at the door of her room, and Alma's face looked in.

"What, no fire!" she said, "and it is quite a cold night; how lazy of the housemaids! I must speak about it to-morrow; but my room is next door; bring your brush and comb there, and we will have a talk over my fire."

It was the first time that Alma had ever given such an invitation, and Emmie felt considerably flattered, especially when she found that the talk was to be a real *tête-à-tête*; the maid had gone to relieve guard in Lady Rivers's room, and Alma was dealing with her shining plaits herself, and looked as ready for a gossip as ever did Christabel Moore when she stole down to Emmie's chilly little bedroom from the attics, in evening dishabille, for a specially confidential chat. This room of Alma's was something of a contrast to that other one, and Emmie felt wrapt in a dream of comfort and luxury, as she sat on a low stool by a blazing fire and watched the little streams of gold dropping through Alma's white fingers as she unfastened her braids and shook the rippling glory all about her. In this one respect, in spite of Sir Francis's disparagement, there was no comparison between the cousins. Emmie's soft dusky hair was well enough, and made just the right setting for the perfect oval of her face, but Alma's hair was a distinct beauty in itself—its crisp, wilful waves and fitful lights and pale glooms seeming as full of individuality and character as everything else about her. Emmie took up and stroked a long coil of hair that had rippled down to where she sat, and said, "I wish Christabel Moore could see it."

"Christabel is the little pale one, who always gets behind her sister, is she not?" asked Alma indifferently.

"She is the artist," answered Emmie; "that is why I wish she could see you just now with your hair down."

It was the nearest approach to a compliment that Emmie had ever ventured on, and Alma, reading the sincerity with which it was offered, in Emmie's admiring eyes, repaid it by asking a few questions about the Moores, hitherto a tabooed subject in Eccleston Square. She did not expect to be interested in hearing the history

of her aunt's lodgers, but she was ; her questions came quicker, and after one long answer from Emmie, Alma sat musing silently, quite forgetting to roll up the coils of hair she held in her hand.

"I could do that," she said at last decidedly. "The kind of life you have described is not hard. I don't think I should object to toil, or even poverty, if I had got straight down to it once for all, and if there was nobody who had expected better things of me, looking on to reproach and complain over me. Emmie, I don't know why I say this to you ; I don't think that till to-night I minded very much what you might be thinking of me, but I feel now as if I must ask you, once for all, not to judge me hardly for anything you may hereafter hear of my doing—not very hardly. Unless you could stand exactly where I do, and feel all the influences round me, all the little threads pulling me, you couldn't judge fairly. You don't know how hard it is to resist what comes to one with the very air one breathes, or how often when I think of doing some things, I wish for a hand to be stretched out strong enough to save me from myself—from that half of myself which everybody about me feeds while the other starves."

There was a short silence when Alma finished, for Emmie's breath was coming so quickly that she could not command her voice to speak at once, and besides, could she have understood rightly? Did Alma mean her to understand, and might she answer in the only words that her conscience would let her speak after such an appeal, though the very thought of speaking them brought a chill feeling as of a cold wind blowing through her heart.

"I think the hand is stretched out," she said at last, "but you won't see it. I—I wish you would. Alma, dear Alma, I wish you would."

Alma finished putting up her hair, and then she bent down and kissed Emmie between her eyes.

"You are all trembling and cold," she said. "Poor child, I ought not to keep you up late when you tire yourself out waiting on mamma all day. You are a good little thing, Emmie—a good little thing, and I am glad

we know each other better now than we did before you stayed here; but your world is so different from mine, you must try not to judge me."

"Good-night, then," said Emmie, making a necklace of her arms so as to hold down Alma's face near her own till she had finished what she wanted to say; "I am only a little thing compared to you, but let me just tell you what Katherine Moore——"

"No," cried Alma, smiling, "not what Katherine Moore says; I won't hear a word more of hers to-night. She is miles above me, and she knows nothing of me and my world."

"Then I will say something quite new to you," Emmie whispered; "something that I have never said to myself before. Whatever your world may be like, I don't think it will be worth living in, if you let love slip out of it. Don't do that, Alma, for you can help it if you will."

"Can I? Good-night. It is actually striking twelve, and I cannot let you speak another word to-night," said Alma.

CHAPTER XIV.

MRS. KIRKMAN'S KISS.

*Dansez, chantez, villageois, la nuit tombe—Sabine, un jour,
A tout donné—sa beauté de colombe—et son amour—
Pour l'anneau d'or du Comte de Saldagne—pour un bijou!
Le vent qui vient à travers la montagne, me rendra fou, oui, me rendra fou.*

EMMIE got up next morning with a strong impression on her mind that "silence was golden," and she made several firm resolutions while she was dressing, about the careful government of her tongue during the remaining portion of her visit to Eccleston Square. Only two days more now; surely she should be able to live through them without falling foul of any subject that would again force words from her lips such as she could not remember afterwards without agonies of shyness. She comforted herself with the assurance that there seemed every prospect of a quiet, uneventful time, to be spent monotonously in Lady RIVERS's dressing-room, for she found, on leaving her room, that Alma had had a note from Con-

stance, begging her to take the opportunity of Emmie's being with their mother to spend two days with her, and Sir Francis was sure to take himself out of the way, in the evenings of Alma's absence.

The first day passed smoothly enough to put Emmie off her guard, but on the next, on the very last day of her visit, unexpected trials of temper assailed her, culminating towards evening in a great stress of circumstance that brought her face to face with a self she had not known before to be alive within her. For five strange, fire-lit minutes this new, unexpected Emmie West woke up, and, as it were, stood forth and spoke outside the childish, familiar one, and then, in a great silence that followed the outburst of speech, the new, passionate self had to be taken back and shut up a prisoner, under bonds that one hoped might not have to be broken ever again. But all this happened at the end of a long, trying day; such self-revelations, such comings out of the kernel of the being to act irrespectively of old habits, do not occur without a great deal of previous emotion to lead up to them.

The rose-coloured ribbons again formed a link in the chain of small events that led to Emmie's second outburst of loquacity. Feeling the need of something to brighten her spirits, for Lady Rivers had been in a complaining temper all day, Emmie had adorned herself early in the afternoon with some shreds of her new finery, and Dr. Urquhart, who had lately taken to paying long afternoon visits in Eccleston Square, and indulging his patient with a good deal of conversation after his professional duties were ended, chanced once or twice, in a semi-absent way, to fix his eyes while he was talking, on the bright ribbon that fastened Emmie's dark hair, being puzzled perhaps to account for such an appearance on *her* head. Either this circumstance or something unusual in his manner when he took leave of Emmie, put a sudden new thought into Lady Rivers's mind, which interested her so much as to make her forego the just anger she might have felt against a physician for having eyes for anyone but herself while visiting her. She magnanimously put this offence aside in her eagerness to follow out the discovery, and she experienced quite a glow of good-humour in consequence of her self-conquest.

"Urquhart," she began meditatively, as soon as the door had closed behind the doctor. "Urquhart, that is a Scotch name, and a good one, I fancy. Do you happen to know, Emmie, whether these Urquharts of yours are related to Sir Colin Urquhart of Glen Urst? Your uncle spent a day once with Sir Colin when we were in Scotland, and I would take an opportunity of mentioning the circumstance to Dr. Graham Urquhart if I thought it would do any good."

"What good could it do?" said Emmie, looking puzzled. "I believe Sir Colin Urquhart is what Mrs. Urquhart calls a far-away cousin of theirs, but why should Dr. Urquhart care to know that Uncle Rivers has visited him?"

"My dear child, you don't understand these matters, and your poor mother is of course out of the way of thinking of them. It does not signify, however, as you have, fortunately, some one to take a little care for you when the right time comes. Long before then, my mind will be quite free from all my present cares." Lady Rivers took a few moments for thought and then continued, more to herself than to Emmie: "But no, I am not glad to hear of Dr. Urquhart's connection with the baronet, the owner of Glen Urst, a splendid place, I can tell you, Emmie. Scotch people think a great deal about family when they happen to have it, and unfortunately your father's bankruptcy was made so public, and now your poor mother's miserably ill-judged step of letting lodgings—even our connection would hardly outweigh that with Scotch people—but," raising her voice and looking at her niece again, "never mind, Emmie, you have pleased me very much since you came here, and I never mean to let you slip quite away from us again. We shall be a great deal together by-and-by, no doubt: when Alma is married she will be so sought after, and so much engaged in society, that I, like an unselfish mother as I am, shall have to make up my mind to see very little of her, and then I shall lay claim to you, my dear, altogether. You will live here almost entirely, I daresay, by-and-by, and I shall have many little plans and schemes for you too. You will see, my dear."

Emmie's cheeks were blazing by this time, and she

now rose from her seat and stood full in front of Lady Rivers's sofa, looking at her with something in her eyes that almost took away her aunt's breath.

"I hope you will never make any plans for me, Aunt Rivers," she said. "I don't like it. I am sorry you made plans for Alma, and I hope you never will for me; I don't mean almost to live with you by-and-by, for I am wanted at home, and I had rather stay there, whatever may have happened to make people ashamed of us. The Urquharts are not ashamed of us; they are good friends of mamma's and mine, and we don't want them to be anything else. I hope you will never speak like that of them again, Aunt Rivers, or I can't come and nurse you next time that you send for me."

"My dear, what are you thinking about? Sit down—you startled me," said Lady Rivers, who was actually too much cowed by the indignation in Emmie's face, to be, all at once, as angry as contradiction usually made her; "you are misunderstanding me, I'm sure, and you must not look at me in that way, when I am thinking of nothing but how to be kind to you. I wonder you have the heart. There, you see, you have quite shaken me, and I must have my drops again, or I shall not be able to settle comfortably, or get a wink of sleep the whole evening."

Emmie found and administered the drops and then resumed her seat by the sofa, but, though she said no more, there was still something in her face and manner which so roused Lady Rivers's instinct of self-justification, that she could not give the draught a fair chance of composing her, but felt obliged to launch out into fresh expostulations.

"You ought not to be so independent, Emmie, you ought not, indeed. A girl, with four brothers and a sister, all utterly without prospects, and with a mother in weak health, to say nothing of a father who has twice failed in business—not very creditably—a girl in such circumstances as these should be very humble, and thankful to anyone who speaks of holding out a hand to smooth her way in life. She should not have too much confidence in herself. Good looks are not every-

thing, no, nor the power of winning favour either, if she chances to have that. Why, even Alma has not found everything to her mind; she could tell you, if she pleased, how possible it is to be deceived and disappointed in people who appear at one time to be devoted to you. Whatever your uncle may choose to say, there is no one equal to Alma. I don't say it's impossible to have more beauty, but I do say that I never saw anyone who had such charming ways, or who made people get so fond of her; yet even Alma has not met in one quarter with the treatment she had a right to expect. You may well look surprised, my dear, but I am telling you this for a lesson, and also to show you that if I do seem a little over anxious about my dear Alma's prospects, it is not without provocation. I am not a schemer, with such daughters as mine I have had no occasion to scheme, but I naturally could not sit still quietly under the idea that Alma had been neglected. Happily that trouble is over now, and as things are turning out I am more than satisfied. We can look on the old disappointment as a great escape now, for even if Mr. Anstice had behaved as he ought, and avoided quarrelling with his uncle, he would never have been as good a match as Horace Kirkman, and I should never have liked him half as well."

"But Alma—but Alma herself?" said Emmie, in a breathless whisper.

"Alma is convinced that a girl may very well be mistaken in choosing for herself, and that it would be mere perversity in her to go on preferring a person who has once failed her."

"Does Alma think he failed," said Emmie, still in a half whisper; "does she call *that* failing?"

"My dear, you know nothing about it," answered Lady Rivers, a little impatiently. "A man of the world should know well enough that he has no right to aspire to a girl like Alma, unless he has something suitable to offer her, and if he wilfully throws away all his fine prospects for the sake of crotchets and scruples, that half the world don't understand, what can one think of his affection for her? A girl of spirit cannot possibly permit herself to be so treated."

"But if she knew he loved her all the time," per-

sisted Emmie; "and that he hoped she would understand him, and like him the better for standing up for what was right, even at the risk of not getting her at once; then—oh, Aunt Rivers, do you suppose Alma does not know that?"

"You are talking great nonsense, I think, Emmie, and growing quite excited again. What is the use of my taking drops if you look at me in that startling way, and touch me with such a hot, trembling hand? I don't understand you at all to-night, and I wish I had never begun to talk to you. What can you know about Alma and Wynyard Anstice more than I have told you! How can you possibly form an opinion on the subject,—an ignorant child who has never been anywhere!"

"I am sorry I touched you with a hot hand," said Emmie, no longer in a whisper, but in a tone cold enough to heal the burning touch of her fingers, "and I am sorry we began to talk, since it has disturbed you so much, Aunt Rivers. Perhaps I had better leave you for a little while, and send Ward to give you your afternoon tea."

"Yes, indeed, I think you had better go away, for you have not managed me at all well this afternoon, I must say, Emmie. Your uncle would have been quite surprised if he had heard the tone in which you spoke to me just now, and would have had less to say for the future about your sweetness of temper. However, you tell me you are sorry, and as I never take offence, I shall say no more about it, but allow you to come and read to me, after I have had my tea, as usual—and you may give me a kiss before you go, if you like. You had better go down into the drawing-room, I think. I did say I would see Mrs. Kirkman, if she called to-day, but I hardly feel equal to the exertion now. Mrs. Kirkman's voice, and her musk, and the rustle she makes with her dress in moving about are very overpowering when one is not feeling strong. I should like you to speak to her for me, Emmie, and to tell her that I am sorry I cannot see her, and that Alma will certainly be back to-morrow in time to keep her engagement for the flower show. Now, don't forget that part of the message, Emmie, and speak it as pleasantly as you can. There is no saying what

good might not follow to your brothers, if Mrs. Kirkman were to take a fancy to you; and instead of looking proud and vexed, you ought to be grateful to me for giving you the chance of making a favourable impression on such an influential person."

Emmie gave the kiss required, with more reluctance than she had ever felt in bestowing a kiss, since long past nursery days, when the servants in Saville Street had been wont to remark that Miss Emmie had a pride and a will of her own for all her sweet looks. Then she betook herself to the drawing-room, hoping in that ample space to walk off the excitement that was making her heart beat so quickly and her cheek burn. She hoped devoutly that Mrs. Kirkman would not come just yet, not till she was in a fit state to meet her with the dignity and distance with which such an antagonist ought to be encountered. Her brothers, indeed! As if Harry and Casabianca were of the sort to need that their sister should curry favour with anyone on their behalf! No, it would not do to think of that. Emmie's steps quickened and quickened, keeping pace with the rush of indignant feeling, till even the long drawing-room seemed a confined space to walk up and down in. Yet the thoughts that were waiting behind these surface ones were more agitating still—Alma—Mr. Anstice—that hint about Dr. Urquhart, which seemed to Emmie just then a cruel attempt to rob her of the one consoling spot in her life, by bringing bitterness and confusion into the very land of Beulah itself.

She left off pacing the room at last, finding it did her no good, and went and stood in the window recess between two great pyramids of rare exotics in pots, that had been sent from the Golden Mount conservatories the day before, and were filling every corner of the drawing-room with their strong spicy odours. It was raining out of doors a very deluge of rain; but even when standing quite close to the well-fitting double windows Emmie could only faintly catch the sound of the sweeping wind and rushing tempest, under which the trees in the Square garden were bending their black heads, while the foot-passengers on the pavement below cowered and fled to the nearest shelter. Outside in the storm seemed better

to Emmie just then than inside among the flowers, and the contrast between within and without struck her with a curious, angry pain. She looked round the room: there, on the piano was Alma's music lying scattered about, the songs she had sung two evenings ago to Horace Kirkman; here were the flowers breathing themselves out, as it seemed to Emmie, in silent payment for those songs, and for the smiles that went with them. A confusion of thoughts whirled up into her brain, till she could almost have believed that the trumpet-shaped blossoms hanging round her changed themselves into veritable brazen trumpets, and were blaring out harsh sounds that summoned her, and her brothers, and all the world to come and bow down before the great Kirkman image of gold that Aunt Rivers had set up. Yet even this fantastic picture did not present itself coherently, for it seemed to Emmie now that the trumpet-flowers had changed their note, and were calling on her to pass through a burning fiery furnace to save Alma from having to bow down. Gradually, however, her thoughts steadied, the flower-trumpets left off singing and swinging, and Emmie discovered a word, a sentence that remained clear in her mind when all the seething anger and the fancies had drawn themselves away: "Mr. Anstice ought to know, even if you have to tell him yourself; he ought to know the danger, and that Alma sometimes, if only sometimes, wishes to be saved from it." This was what conscience said at the end of all.

During the thickest of her fancies, Emmie had heard, without noticing, the stopping of a carriage before the front door, but now in the calm that had followed, the voice of her old enemy James announcing Mrs. Kirkman reached her understanding quite distinctly. It brought her out of the recess almost her ordinary self again, excepting only that she drew up her head a little higher than usual to encounter the entering visitor, and offered her hand without any appearance of shyness.

Mrs. Kirkman was somewhat surprised at the cold, dignified air with which Lady Rivers's message was delivered to her, but not being a person apt to take offence, it did not occur to her to be the least in the world quelled by it. She would have been quite ready

to patronise one of Fra Angelico's angels if he had stepped alive towards her out of a picture, psaltery in hand, and to offer him tickets for a concert or a dinner at the huge palace Mr. Kirkman had built at Kensington Park Gate, if it had occurred to her, from the scantiness of his tunic, that his purse was scantily filled. His angelic beauty and his airs of heaven would have had nothing awful about them for her.

"My dear, let me sit down," she said, "and then I can listen comfortably to what you have to say to me. The stairs in this house are rather steep compared to ours, which Mr. Kirkman had made on purpose to suit me, and my breath is just a little short. There! I have untied my bonnet strings, and—yes, here is my fan—now I know you won't mind sitting down opposite me, and telling me exactly how my friend Lady Rivers is to-day. I have a right to be anxious, and Alma has told me who you are, and all about your making such a nice quiet companion to your aunt while she is sick. You won't mind answering a few questions, will you, my dear?"

Emmie felt that she might just as well throw a bucket of water up at the sun, with a view of extinguishing its light at mid-day, as attempt to put out the radiant complacency of that large motherly face by any frosts of reserve within her command. She had to give in without any show of resistance, and to submit to the squeezing of a fat hand laid over hers to emphasize the questioner's anxiety or relief at the information she elicited by a series of close inquiries, such as Emmie could not imagine she would ever have ventured to put to Alma.

"You see I am so glad to have an opportunity of getting the truth from someone," Mrs. Kirkman remarked, after an interval of fanning. "Mr. Kirkman was getting fidgety. He's a man that don't like to hear of sickness or death coming in to put back arrangements that he's set his mind upon. He ain't been used to it, for things always do seem to fall out as he wishes, and if by chance anything of the kind happens to hinder his plans, he's apt to get impatient, and fly off one don't know where. I would not say this before your cousin, but you will understand, my dear, why a serious illness

of Lady Rivers would be a great inconvenience, and worse than an inconvenience to us just now. Oh yes, I see you are quick enough to guess that it is not only of Mr. Kirkman I'm thinking; there's someone else who would dislike even more than he to be shut out from this house by anything untoward happening. You look a little surprised, my dear, at my speaking so plainly" (for Emmie had, in fact, raised her eyebrows with an expression that even Mrs. Kirkman could not quite overlook), "but I am a very frank, talkative person, and everybody who has to do with me must take me as I am; and though perhaps you mayn't know it, my dear Miss West, matters have gone so far between Eccleston Square and Kensington Park Gate, that you and I may as well begin to look upon each other as relations at once. I hope you have not any objection, for I have not. I never had but one child, my Horace, who was from the first too sturdy a fellow to put up with much mother's petting, and I've always longed to get pretty young girl-things like you about me to make much of."

The full-blown, smiling face had got alarmingly near by this time. Emmie felt the warm, puffy breath on her cheek, and the Paradise feather nodding into her eyes. She could not put up her hand and push it away, that would be too naughty and childish, however vehemently she might wish such a course of action were possible; she could not even openly shrink, for it was a motherly face after all; she could only drop her chin an inch or so to save her pouting, quivering lips, and receive the sounding salute, when it came, in the middle of her forehead.

"There," said Mrs. Kirkman, laughing, and holding out both hands, "you'll know me again, my dear, when we meet next. Help me up from my seat, for I must be going, and I ain't as active as I used to be twenty years ago. I don't mind confessing it to you, but four sumptuous meals such as Mr. Kirkman will have put on the table every day at Kensington Park Gate ain't quite the thing for me, not being exactly what I was brought up to. Why, what a colour I have given you! And it was only an old woman's kiss, after all, not deserving of such a pretty blush as that to come after it. You must take this fan of mine to cool your cheeks; it came from

Paris only yesterday, and maybe you'll find more use for it than I shall. What! you say you had rather not take it? My dear Miss West, but you must. I'm not one to be said 'no' to. That's something I've learned of my husband, and seeing how well it has answered with him, I hold to the lesson. Besides, you need not be so shy; it's a pretty toy, I dare say, but I've a dozen others at home, and I really want you to keep this as a token that we are to be fast friends by-and-by, when——, well, as you shake your head, and don't seem to like me to say *when*, I won't finish my sentence, but leave it as a crow to be plucked between us on some gala day, when perhaps you'll be glad enough to escape with only my kisses; Mr. Kirkman not being the man to let off such a pretty bridesmaid as you'll make, without giving him his due at his son's wedding."

Mrs. Kirkman had talked herself nearly to the door, and Emmie was following with a vain hope of being allowed to thrust the fan back into her hand at the last moment, when James's voice, announcing another guest, was heard close behind them. "Mr. Anstice."

It came like a thunder-clap on Emmie, just because, ten minutes ago, she had been planning how she would act, and what she would say, if such an unlikely circumstance as Mr. Anstice's appearance on this, her last afternoon, should fall out. Oh, why had fate taken her so cruelly at her word, and put the task she was dreading upon her so soon, before she had well had time to summon up resolution for it! She quite forgot her anxiety about the fan, and flitted back into the middle of the room before she took any notice of Mr. Anstice's entrance, feeling that the first necessity was to leave as great a space as possible between herself and Mrs. Kirkman, and put an end to those dreadful innuendoes of which (terrible thought) he might possibly have overheard a word or two.

In a moment the drawing-room door shut behind Mrs. Kirkman, and then, before Emmie had settled it with herself that most likely he had not heard, she felt, rather than saw, for she dared not look up, that Mr. Anstice had brought a chair near to the sofa, on which she had seated herself, and was beginning to talk to her.

Wynyard was surprised to find that her shyness continued after the first few moments, when he had tried his very best to put her at ease with him, by talking of Saville Street, and making flattering allusions to Katherine Moore, and to that discussion in "Air Throne" to which he had been made welcome. He grew quite concerned at her downcast looks and her silence. He was always very much at home with her himself, and had a tender, half-playful, half-affectionate regard for her, such as he might have had for a young sister, if fate had been so kind as to bestow such a treasure on him, a feeling full of repose and sweetness, without any of the excitement that Alma's presence brought. He thought he should very much like to make Emmie look up at him just now, and to comfort her if there was anything really amiss. It never occurred to him that the cause of her trouble could possibly react on him in any way, or be any concern of his.

"What is the matter?" he said at last, when there had been quite a moment's silence. "I don't think you listened to what I told you just now of my having met Casabianca in the street this morning, and I have a more important anecdote about him in store which I cannot possibly bring out unless you will look up and seem interested. Come, now, did we not make a bargain to tell each other of our grievances in this house? If you will begin, I will go on. Mine are quite serious, I assure you, and yours I am convinced cannot go beyond James's and Casabianca's silver tray, for I gathered from Miss Rivers, when I called last week, that the whole household is at your feet since you came to stay here. Won't you look up and tell me?"

He was not at all prepared for the real pain in Emmie's eyes when she did look up.

"That lady who left the room as you came in," she began, abruptly, "was Mrs. Kirkman. She has been sitting here talking to me for a long time."

"Well," he said, a little puzzled, "she is a very good-natured person, is she not? I met her the other night at a *conversazione*, and she did not frighten me. I was even a little relieved, I think, to find her so big. It gives a reason for the Brobdingnagian Palace they have built

at Kensington Park Gate that reconciles one to it a little. She has not done anything very bad to you, I hope?"

"She gave me a kiss," said Emmie, her lip quivering so piteously as she spoke, that the words came out with difficulty, and she had to pause to bring them into order for something else that was to follow.

Wynyard felt tempted to laugh, for one second, the contrast between Emmie's extreme agitation and the cause assigned to it struck him as so comical. Then all at once his very heart stood still, for a thought came like a flash of lightning, warning him of a blow that he must call up all his courage to meet manfully.

"You have something else to tell me," he asked slowly; "I should like to hear it at once if you don't mind."

"She said," Emmie went on, looking away and trying hard to empty her voice of significance; "she said she kissed me because we, she and I, were likely to be relations soon."

"And she meant——?"

"Her son and—and——"

"Miss Rivers! Well, I did not think it would be that; not anything quite so bad as that."

The words were spoken so quietly that Emmie looked up relieved for a moment, and then she could not remove her pitying, remorseful eyes from the face (always a mirror of feeling), which told a great deal too plainly of the stress of the blow she had dealt. It was dreadful to see the pain, the look of death upon it. She felt like a murderess, as if she had really plunged a dagger into a living heart, and was watching the life-blood flow. How was she to bring out the words to which this information was meant only to lead up! There was no use in speaking them just now; he could not take them in till this life and death struggle was over.

It really lasted only for a second or two under her eyes. The instant Wynyard recovered himself enough to know that she was looking at him, he sprang up and moved away. Her soft, pitying gaze seemed to carry a sting of agony with it just then. In a minute or two,

he thought, this live pain with which he was struggling for very existence, as it seemed, would be a dead one—dead with how much else of his very soul extinguished with it. He strolled to the piano where Alma had played to him on the evening when he had resolved to take up again the hope of winning her, and saw some music lying about with Horace Kirkman's name written on it in a bold hand. That sent him further away still to the window recess, where he stood for some minutes among the flowers, inhaling their strong perfume without knowing at the time what the impression on his senses was, although similar odours remained hateful to him to his dying day, and always brought back something of the horror of confusion and pain he suffered then. It was not the loss of Alma only that was such a blow to him. He had at least believed himself to be prepared for that, ever since the change in his worldly prospects had altered their relations to each other, though there had never been any taking back of old admissions of preference by Alma herself. He had often thought of losing all future right in her, but this way of losing seemed to involve a great deal more than the actual loss in the future. It was a shattering of all the thoughts of her that dated from the first bright dawning of imaginative love in his boyhood, when she had summed up all perfection to him; a making all the past as empty as it seemed the coming years were to be. Alma and Horace Kirkman! He knew a little of Horace Kirkman; not one bad thing that could be said to stamp him as unworthy, but just a number of very small things which to Wynyard's mind revealed the man's character plainly enough; boastful speeches, little meannesses as the reverse side of ostentatious lavishness, a coarse word or two in an overheard conversation, showing, he thought, a nature that the Alma of his dreams would have shrunk from instinctively. How could his recollection of her stand out pure and clear by the side of this other utterly distasteful image? Wynyard knew all the time that these were only first thoughts born of his own selfish pain: the pity for her, the longing to save her from what he knew would be misery in the end, the remorse for this first harsh judgment of her, the struggle to put her back in her supreme place, and

worship the fallen idol as devoutly as ever, would all have to be gone through in their turn—long, long vistas of pain.

He was just rousing himself to the thought of where he was, and to the necessity of getting away from a place where he was liable at any moment to encounter Alma herself, when he felt a timid touch on his arm, hardly a touch—it was more like the flutter of a little bird's wing hovering near, and looking round he saw Emmie standing by his side.

"I am going out of the room now," she said. "I would have gone before, but—but—before I go, I want to tell you why I repeated Mrs. Kirkman's words to you just now. I thought you ought to know—because——"

"You were quite right," said Wynyard, gently, "and I thank you for it."

"Because," continued Emmie, who could only go straight on, and felt she should be lost if the prepared words were to slip from her, "because, though Mrs. Kirkman and Aunt Rivers say it is to be so, as I told you, Alma herself speaks differently. It was one night when she and I were sitting together alone; but——" she paused, almost frightened at the change, the sudden, eager hopefulness that sprang into his face; "do you think I ought to repeat to you what Alma said to me alone?"

"You need not, thank you," said Wynyard, recovering himself after a struggle that had prevented words. "I understand enough to thank you with all my heart for caring enough for me—for her—to say what you have said; for giving me so much hope, and trusting me so far. It may not make any difference; I think now that I should have tried what remonstrance could do without it, but perhaps that is only because you have brought me back to life again. You said you were going, but I will go. I have intruded on you a great deal longer than I intended."

He had got to the door, leaving Emmie still standing among the flowers, when he turned suddenly and came back again. The colour had returned into his face, and the dawning of a smile was making it look itself again.

"I want you to come away from among Mr. Kirkman's flowers," he said, "for I think there is something poisonous about them, and I'm sure you don't like them any better than I do. And there is another thing I want. I want you to promise me never to blame yourself for what you said to-day, for your kindness to me, whatever comes of it; you must not."

In the midst of his own pain it had occurred to him, with that instinctive reading of a woman's heart which only a very high-minded man is capable of, that she would perhaps recall that touch on his arm, those pitying looks she had given him, and when the excitement of the occasion was over, suffer pangs of wounded reserve and pride on their account, and he wanted to save her from self-blame if he could.

"You must promise not to regret anything you have said this afternoon," he persisted.

"I will try," said Emmie, reading the kindness in his face, and feeling grateful, though her heart sank under it as beneath a weight.

Then he went, and she walked straight to the fireplace, and seated herself on the same low stool where Alma sat to read Agatha's letter on the evening of Constance's wedding-day. No idle tears, however, came to *her* to relieve her pain. She knew quite well that she had not time to cry. Aunt Rivers would ring her bell in a minute to summon her to give an account of Mrs. Kirkman's visit, and Emmie thought she had almost rather put out her eyes than let Aunt Rivers see them swollen with crying to-day. She pressed her fingers tightly over the dry aching balls, and set her will to the task of seizing, and, as it were, repressing within the old bounds this strange, new self that had to-day performed feats and spoken words she must not so much as think about again for a long, long time. To-morrow she should be at home, making tea for the boys at this hour in the little schoolroom, and having the prospect before her of discussing the weekly bills with Mary Ann in the course of the evening. Surely she should be quite herself again under that pressure, and need never let thoughts of what had happened here rise up to trouble her. Emmie's short

experience of life had already taught her more self-control than she was usually credited with by those who only observed the sympathetic expression of her face. The victory over her agitation was quickly won, and when the bell summoned her she was ready to take into her aunt's room a face in which Lady Rivers was not able to detect any disturbance.

"So," she said, when Emmie had answered all her questions, "Mr. Anstice has been calling here again, has he? It is strange how slow some people are in finding out where they are not welcome. He must have seen the Kirkmans' carriage at the door, and Mrs. Kirkman herself. I wonder what he thought about it! Well, he will have to know the truth sooner or later, and it had better not be till all is quite satisfactorily settled, for I would not have Alma's mind disturbed just now for worlds. I think I shall write to Mr. Anstice myself then, a nice sympathetic little note, for after all he was very useful to Frank, and behaved particularly well when poor dear Melville got into that unlucky scrape at Oxford. I don't forget all *that*; but if I let him have early news of the engagement, and write to him myself, I don't see that he will have any right to consider himself ill used. He can't possibly be so selfish as to wish to stand between Alma and such a match as Horace Kirkman. He must surely see that he has nothing to offer comparable to that."

What Mrs. Kirkman, on her side, thought of Mr. Anstice she was at that moment expounding to her son, whom she had come across at the corner of a neighbouring square, and taken into the carriage during its transit across Hyde Park.

"Quite a high young man, and very handsome," she was saying. "I don't know how he comes to be calling so often at No. 17, but it strikes me that he looks very much at home in that house. He is not a relation of the Riverses, I know that, and though Miss Rivers and he were talking very intimately about old times and old friends one day when I came in, and found them together, I observed that she never called him anything but Mr. Anstice."

"Anstice," returned Horace, crossly. "I know the man, a barrister and scribbler in the papers, and those

who know him best say that, clever as he is, he will never get very far, for he has a knack of always taking up the least workable side of every question. Christian socialism, temperance, I don't know what; notions that would drive my father wild, and cannot, I should think, go down any better with Sir Francis. I don't understand your being so particularly taken with his looks, mother!"

"Well, there's a something—but mind, Horace, I don't mean 'airs' when I say 'high.' It's a something I've never been able to put my finger upon yet. Money won't give it, nor yet education, for you've had the very best of that, you know. It's done a great deal for you, and put you in a better place than your father and me, as far as society goes, though to be sure, you'll never be such a *man* as your father, but it has not given you quite the look and way with you that I've noticed in a few tip-top people, and though this Mr. Anstice mayn't have a penny to bless himself with, he's got *that*. I don't want to make you uneasy, Horace. I'm only telling you just what I see, and explaining why I think that if I were you I would try to get something settled in a certain quarter before very long. Your father hates a thing to be long-in hand, and would like to see you engaged to-morrow, and married by the end of the month if it could be done, and we know well enough what Sir Francis' and Lady Rivers's wishes are. It's only the young lady herself."

"Only," cried Horace, turning away his head, and looking out of the window.

"Well, I never knew you backward in asking for anything you wanted before, my boy."

"Perhaps because I never wanted anything before so much as this," returned the young man, to whom love was already giving more effective lessons in humility, the root of good manners, than his various teachers through a long and expensive education had been able to instil.

"Your father thought he was asking for a good deal when he came for me," said Mrs. Kirkman, smiling, and putting a big hand on her son's shoulder, "for I was his master's daughter, and had plenty of suitors after me. Shall I tell you what I had been thinking for a good while before he spoke? There now—that he was not quite

the man I had taken him for at first, or he would not have waited so long. He found me ready enough, and though as I said before, you arn't your father, you're his son, and Kirkmans have generally got what they really set their minds upon, ever since I have known anything of the family. Miss Rivers left word that she should not fail to be home in time to go with us to the Botanical Gardens to-morrow afternoon, and you have only to give me a look or a squeeze of the foot at any minute, and I will manage to keep out of the way."

"I shan't give you a look or a squeeze of the foot you may be satisfied, mother," said Horace. "I could not do it to command in that fashion; and yet, perhaps, you are right about the time, and I wish with all my heart that it were well over. But here we are at Kensington Park Gate, and there is my father's brougham at the door before us."

This conversation was one of the consequences that resulted from Emmie's hour in the drawing-room at Eccleston Square. A second result came to Alma in the form of a letter by the eight o'clock evening post on the following day, when Emmie was making tea for the children in the back sitting-room at home, and wondering, while she listened to the latest anecdotes and most recent Saville Street witticisms as retailed by Mildie and Casabianca, why her fortnight's absence should have stretched such a gulf between her and these once absorbing topics. When the note was brought to her, Alma was alone in the drawing-room, waiting till she could make up her mind to go to her mother's room, where she was due, and make an announcement to her which it was doubtless also her mother's due to hear, before the event that had to be communicated was another hour old. Alma was trying to make herself believe that she looked forward to the caresses and praises which might be expected to follow her news. She ought to be glad to know that in a minute or two more she would bring so much satisfaction, such happiness to her mother; she ought not to shrink from the triumphant jubilee there would be made over her; it was the reward she had to look to, and reasonably she should be in a hurry to taste it. Just then the letter was brought to her and she took it and held it in her

hand, looking at it by the fire-light, stupidly as one does look at a well-known handwriting that one has not seen for a long time. How familiar it was, and how strange! Dreading what there might be inside the letter, Alma gave herself five minutes in which to recall the pictures that the look of those characters on the envelope brought back to her. Her schoolroom exercise books, when she was thirteen and fourteen, which had had many pages in a handwriting only a little less formed than that; pages scribbled off in some great press of schoolroom business, to secure her being able to join some boating or nutting excursion for which the others had gone off to prepare without thinking of her troubles. How exhilarating the run down to the river, hand in hand, used to be when the task was done! How happy one dared be without thinking of consequences in those days. And again the letters that had come day by day, when Frank had been taken ill with small-pox abroad, and only one member of the reading party to which he belonged had dared to stay in the infected spot to nurse him, and write the bulletins that had brought at first such dismay and then relief and thankfulness. Alma remembered the position on the pages of these letters where sentences had occurred which had first made her know that she was in the writer's mind while he penned them, that he was thinking of her anxiety more than of any other person's, that it was to herself rather than to Frank the devotion was paid. Yes, and it was a look she had seen on her mother's face, while reading one of the letters, that had confirmed her own impression, and permitted her to carry it as a treasure in her heart through all those anxious days. With this recollection, Alma did what she knew she must never do again—scarcely remember henceforth from this evening; she lifted the envelope to her face and laid her lips on the writing for an instant. It was a good-bye—only that—a good-bye to the poetry, to the romance of her life. Henceforth there would be solid substance for her—plenty of that. Was not Moloch the god of riches, and did not people in old times drop their children through his outstretched brazen hands into the consuming fire beneath, that was his heart? Was it so much to drop one's fancies, one's aspirations, the first flower-like feelings

of one's heart through those hands to be burnt up? Surely they would burn without more wailing and demonstration of grief than the trumpets and shawms playing in the Valley of Tophet would drown! Alma broke open the seal of the letter and read:

"MY DEAR ALMA,

"I shall address you in the old style once more, whether I have a right to do so or not; for it is only while recalling old privileges, old unrevoked admissions of yours, that I feel I have any claim to speak as I am going to speak now. Of course a word from you would silence me for ever, but I recollect that I have never had that word. Your mother made me understand some time ago that the change in my worldly prospects after my uncle's death must be held to put an end to the hopes she well knew I had long cherished, and not without her sanction, respecting yourself. She was very angry, and I was very much astonished, for I did not know before that it was the supposed heir of my uncle's money, and not Wynyard Anstice, who was welcomed to your home. I tried hard to nourish resentment, and to believe it could kill love, but you delivered me from that delusion on the evening we talked together over Agatha's profession, and you once more condescended to let me see *yourself* as you are, when the world lets you alone. Since then I have permitted myself to hope again, and this is my hope—that you will let your heart speak to you apart from other considerations and fears. I am the same as I was in the days when you looked kindly on me, when you let me see the dawn of what I believed was to be the crown and glory of my life—your preference for me. I love you as much more now than then, as a man who has struggled and suffered something can love, more than a boy who is beginning to love, and the love of then and now is one unbroken undying growth. I have proved to myself, and can prove to your father and you, that as far as considerations of prudence go, I am fit to be trusted with the care of your future. I cannot, it is true, now offer you the riches you might have elsewhere, but besides the love, of which I shall not trust myself to speak much at present, I can promise you

something more than the proverbial dinner of herbs. I do not think it likely that I shall ever make a great fortune, but I have health and resolution and aptitude for my own sort of work, and I have been successful in a moderate way so far. I have confidence in your father that he would not oppose your wishes if only they were heartily enlisted on my side. Question them, dearest Alma, straitly to-night. I am not pleading selfishly. I would not, or at least I think I would not, have you if you could be—I don't say more prosperous—but happier, more blessed with anyone else, only I don't believe there breathes a man who could love you as I could. With that tremendous boast I must end. In spite of it, Heaven knows, I am humble enough, fearful enough, and as well aware as I can be of what it is I am asking you to do. If your heart stirs towards me, if it is only a little, give it time to speak. I will wait indefinitely, for I fear nothing so much as a hasty verdict.

"Yours, as I have always been since I first knew you,

"WYNYARD ANSTICE."

Nearly an hour passed after Alma finished reading, before she betook herself to her mother's room, and as it was then past nine o'clock, she found Lady Rivers in a very plaintive state on the score of having been left to her own company for such a length of time.

"I have been coughing all the evening, and I have wanted my drops since Ward left me," she began, directly Alma entered. "I miss poor little Emmie West sadly, and I did think you would have made a point of coming to sit with me and read me to sleep on the first evening of my being alone, especially as, so far as I can make out, there has been nothing to keep you downstairs. Ward said that a letter had been taken in to you, but you left the Kirkmans only just before you dressed for dinner, so it cannot have been anything of importance!"

"The letter was nothing you would care to hear about, mamma," answered Alma. "But let me sit down near you on the bed, dear mother. I am sorry that your cough has been troublesome, and that I was not here to give you your drops when Ward went down to her supper,

especially as I have something to tell you now that we are alone."

"My darling Alma!" cried Lady Rivers, stretching out her arms.

"Yes, mamma," said Alma, without however bending her head an inch from the stately height at which she held it. "It is that—Mr. Horace Kirkman spoke to me this afternoon while we were walking in the gardens and——"

"Alma, be quick, child! What is the matter? You accepted him, of course."

"I did not refuse him, mother. Yes, I suppose it was a virtual acceptance; they are sure to interpret it so; but I asked that we might have a little more time to know each other before my acceptance was considered quite final and made known beyond our two families. I felt this to be fair to him, mother, as well as to myself. When he understands the nature of my feelings a little better, he may not be satisfied, and if I am to sell myself, at all events I should like it to be an honest bargain."

"Alma, do you want to kill me by saying such unkind things, just when we ought to be so happy and thankful? Sold, what can you mean! Horace Kirkman is sincerely attached to you, in fact, absolutely devoted to you. However rich he had been I should not, you know, have wished you to marry one who was not that."

"I believe he is that, mamma."

"And your father thinks well of him, and he is enormously rich, one of the best matches in England just now. Lady Amhurst told Constance only last week that Horace Kirkman might have chosen his wife from almost any of the noble families in England, where there are many daughters."

"I wonder he did not."

"He fell in love with you, Alma, directly he was introduced to you, and will not hear of marrying anyone else. Mrs. Kirkman told me this so long ago as when we went to Golden Mount for Christmas. Oh, Alma, you ought to think yourself a lucky girl—you ought to be thankful!"

"Let us begin then, mamma," said Alma; "let us

be very happy about it. I reckoned a great deal on satisfying you."

"But the delay, the risk—I don't like that part. Why could you not have put an end to all anxiety by accepting him outright to-day? It would only have been what the Kirkmans consider his due, and you would have been in a better position with the old people than you will ever be after this hesitation. I too should have been at rest, and could have got well then."

"I did what I could, mamma," said Alma, the tears rising in her eyes. "You must not press me any further; indeed I thought of you, and hoped you would be happy."

Lady Rivers stretched out her arms again, and again took them back empty.

"You talk of my being happy," she said, plaintively, "but it is my children's happiness I want after all—nothing but that—and I can't help having my own views about what will be best for them, Alma, when I have such an example of the miseries of poverty before my eyes for ever, as your poor Aunt West shows us all. It may have made me over anxious, a little pressing, perhaps, but you ought not to resent it; you should consider how natural it is that I should dread the same wretchedness for my own children that I see in my poor sister. If you, Alma, were to come down to letting lodgings, I should turn in my grave, I think, if I had been dead twenty years."

"You will bring the cough back, I am afraid, mamma," said Alma, "if you talk so excitedly. I had better read a few verses to you, as Emmie used to do, to compose you, and then I will say good-night, leaving the rest of our talk till to-morrow morning when we shall both be calmer."

Alma hurriedly took up the first book that came to hand as she spoke, a Bible from which Emmie West, continuing home habits, had been used to read a chapter or a Psalm to her aunt before leaving for the night; she opened it hap-hazard, meaning to read the first sentence or two on which her eye fell. "And the rich man lifted up his eyes being in torments, and saw Lazarus afar off." Alma turned the page quickly. She must

not read *that* as a sedative to her mother's dread of *post-mortem* anxiety. To put her in mind that things might look so differently in her grave as to make poverty no longer the supreme terror, would hardly conduce to her sleep just now. Apparently Emmie West had greater skill in finding composing passages than Alma, for somehow as she turned page after page in search of a calming sentence, she thought that the whole book was written through and through with warnings and exhortations against worldliness and the love of riches; such warnings as would be a mere blow in the face when spoken by her lips to her mother that night. After five minutes' search she laid the book down in despair.

"After all I think I had better ring for Ward to come and read you to sleep," she said; "she is not a good reader, but you say the sound of her voice makes you drowsy, and I am sure the sooner you sleep and the less you think to-night the better it will be for you." Then Alma got up from the bed, and after ringing the bell wished her mother good-night and left the room.

"Without one kiss to her mother on the day when she had engaged herself to be married," Lady Rivers reflected bitterly, chewing the cud of sad thoughts as she lay waiting for Ward, who was enjoying a cheerful gossip with James downstairs over the symptoms of coming change, death, and marriage, in the household. She lay regretting Emmie West, and recalling little anecdotes that had come out in Emmie's talks about her home, which suggested a very different state of things between her and her mother. Lady Rivers could not possibly be capable of envying a person who let lodgings, and yet, all through a sleepless night when she tried to comfort herself by picturing the splendours of Alma's marriage, her thoughts perpetually strayed away from the fascinating theme to wonder how Emmie would look and speak, and what sort of fondling and caressing there would be between the mother and the daughter, when she came to tell poor sister West of some marriage engagement that certainly would not, like Alma's, claim a sentence to itself in all the morning papers.

CHAPTER XV.

CASABIANCA'S POLITICS.

Love, strong as Death, is dead.
Come, let us make his bed
Among the dying flowers :
A green turf at his head ;
And a stone at his feet,
Whereon we may sit
In the quiet evening hours.

"It's enough to make one wish one was a downright Jebusite," said Casabianca, thrusting a poker which he had been moodily balancing on his forefinger into the cindery back-room fire, and causing a cloud of dust to fly over Mildie, seated opposite, with a Euclid open in her lap, on to which, under cover of the twilight and Casabianca's late reverie, a few tears had been silently dropping.

"No, you need not set me right, Mildie, I won't be set right by you. I believe if you were dead, and some one made a mistake in history over your coffin, you would jump up and set 'em right. What does the name signify? I know what I mean; those fellows in the French revolution, who wanted to blow everybody's brains out, and kick things to shivers—and I say that the way in which we are all being treated just now is enough to make a fellow wish to join 'em. It's an awful shame."

"I don't know, Casa," said Mildie, with a great sob in her voice. "I suppose it will be for your good in the end, and perhaps Emmie will enjoy herself when she gets away from Saville Street, and can improve her French, and visit places one reads about. I would go away with a worse person than Aunt Rivers even," said Mildie, savagely, "to see the town where the Chevalier Bayard is buried. Oh, Emmie will enjoy herself, and Katherine Moore says we ought not to make a trouble of it."

"Hang Katherine Moore!" exploded Casabianca; "it's beastly ungrateful of her to say any such thing. I should like to know who has brought up their second scuttle of coals all this winter, while Mary Ann has

been saying that one scuttle a day was enough for attic lodgers, and who's doing it is that Christabel's flowers ever get watered? And then for them to take and say I'm not to make a trouble of being sent out of the house to wear petticoats and yellow stockings, and never have a hat on my head! It's enough to turn a fellow into a flat Jebusite, as I said before; and all that Miss Alma Rivers may marry a money-grubbing Kirkman, and live in the 'Tower of Babel.' You need not shout at me. I know I'm right about *that* name at least. That is what Mr. Kirkman's new big house is called. Uncle Rivers showed it me in *Punch*, when I went to Eccleston Square with mamma the other morning."

"It was not the name I was trying to stop you from saying," answered Mildie. "I don't care what people call Mr. Kirkman's house; it's nothing to us; but Emmie asked me not to say, or let anyone else say, she was going abroad with Aunt Rivers instead of Alma, because Alma was engaged to Mr. Horace Kirkman. It may not be quite settled yet, Emmie thinks, and it ought not to be talked about. If it is such a disgrace to the family, we need not be in a hurry to spread it about."

"Rubbish!" cried Casabianca. "When a fellow has heard a thing with his own ears, where's the use of trying to make him believe he does not know it? I tell you I heard every word Aunt Rivers said to mother. They left me kicking about in a dressing-room, with nothing to do for an hour but listen to the talk that went on in the bedroom beyond; Aunt Rivers coughing half the time to work mother up to pity her, and do as she wished. Did I not feel as if I were being regularly sold, tied up in a sack and delivered over, as the bargaining went on? Such a pleasant change for dearest Emmie! The making of dear little Aubrey! Faugh! And then Uncle Rivers comes out, staring as if he expected to see a fellow six feet high, and puts his hand on my head and says they intend to make a Grecian of me. Grecian, indeed! I always thought the Greeks were fools for speaking such a miserable language, and inventing mathematics, but I did not know before that they made quite such guys of themselves as to go about in yellow stockings and petticoats, and without any hats."

"And you really," said Mildie, sighing, "care about that; and you are not at all glad to be going to a place where you can learn as much as you like, and where you might, if you pleased, get to be a great man. Coleridge and Charles Lamb were brought up where you are going."

"Yes, I know all about 'em, Christabel's been reading it to me out of a book. They had to eat at dinner lumps of boiled beef fat called squabs! Sounds jolly, I think!"

"It's a very unfair world, I think," said Mildred, while a great tear fell and blistered a page of her Euclid. "Some people get what they don't want and can't make any use of, and other people who are starving for that same thing have to go without."

"Shut up there," cried Casabianca; "I thought sisters were made to be sympathetic with one and all that, but you—it makes me more disgusted than anything, to see you sitting there crying, because you are never to go to school again, and never need look into a book unless you please. Don't I wish I were standing in your shoes."

"Would you really like to change places with me?" cried Mildie, a wild notion of personating Casabianca in petticoats and yellow stockings, and profiting by Uncle Rivers's presentation to Christ's Hospital in his stead, shooting momentarily through her brain.

"There," said Casabianca, "that just proves what I'm always pointing out to you—the folly of you girls supposing, because you can do sums, and remember a date or two, that you have the same sort of sense that *we* have, or that you know anything of a man's life. You think, do you, that you could get on better at a public-school than I could, because you're bookish? As if that would help you in a boxing-match. A jolly fix you would find yourself in before a week was out, if I took you at your word."

"I know it's impossible, of course," said Mildie, despairingly. "And, Casa, I don't mean to be unsympathising. I'm sorry enough that you are going away."

"Well you may be," growled Casabianca, resolved not to be mollified too easily. "You'll all feel the miss of me when the Gentle Lamb flies into a temper, and

there's no one to stand up to him. All your precious history and mathematics won't help you to manage *him*."

"I know it," said Mildie. "But that's just why it seems so hard that I am to be taken from things I care for, and set to make a muddle of other people's work. Aunt Rivers told mamma that I was old enough now to be as useful in the family as Emmie, and that I ought to begin, as if just saying that could turn me into Emmie."

"But you think a great deal of yourself, don't you?" said Casabianca, aghast at this sudden appearance of self-depreciation in Mildie.

"No, I don't!—I can't help liking arithmetic and remembering dates and things; but, oh, you need not, all of you, think so badly of me because of that; if I could make myself as pretty as Emmie, and get people to like me as they do her; but, there," dashing her head down upon her Euclid, and making it a mere puddle of tears, "I know they never will. I know how it will be when you and Emmie are gone. The Gentle Lamb will always be making horrible grimaces on the stairs, while Mrs. Urquhart is passing, and I shall not be able to stop him, and the keys will always be missing at tea-time, and I shall never know where to look for the *sal volatile* when mamma has a headache."

"And all because the Rivers's are so selfish," grunted Casabianca. "They have everything they can possibly want, and yet they rob us of Emmie. I know what it is like."

"So do I," said Mildie, "and I wish there was a prophet now, to go to Aunt Rivers and say, 'Thou art the man!' I should like to do it myself."

"Perhaps she'll be awfully punished by-and-by, then," said Casabianca, a good deal cheered by the suggestion; "so, if I were you, Mildie, I would cheer up a bit. You really ain't so bad when you don't set up to know more than other people, and now I'll tell you something that you never should have known if you had not come down from your high horse. Tom Winter has been mistaking you for Emmie this long time."

"How could he?" asked Mildie, not so overwhelmed by the compliment as might have been expected.

"He is my greatest friend this half, and I told him how jolly Emmie was, and that he might look at her at church, if he liked, and the other day I found out that he had been looking at you, and taking you for the pretty one. He says he don't see any reason why he should not. There now."

"I don't care what Tom Winter thinks of me," said Mildie, with dignity; "but if you will like me as Harry likes Emmie, I will do everything I can for you till you go, and always in the holidays, you shall see."

"All right," said Casabianca, edging his chair a little closer to Mildie's. "I never did bully you but for your own good, to keep you from thrusting your learning down everybody's throat, and now as you are reasonable I'll let you into something more. See my purse. You may well stare at what is in it; but Mr. Anstice tipped me tremendously the day he called when everybody was out, and when I walked back to his place with him. He said it was to buy a bat, but I shall get a great deal more out of it than that, I promise you, if only I can make up my mind to change the first 'yellow-boy' I ever had in my life. Don't it look jolly?"

"Mr. Anstice!" exclaimed Mildie. "He called an hour ago with a book for Emmie, and left word that he would not come in, as it was her last day at home. I wondered how he had got to know she was going away. I suppose you told him that and everything—eh, Casabianca?"

"Why not? If Aunt Rivers thinks she can bribe me to keep hers and Miss Alma's secrets she's very much mistaken. Of course I told him everything."

"How did he look?" inquired Mildie, curiously.

"Look!" said Casabianca, "how should he look, but just as he always does, though now I come to think of it, I don't believe he did. He was not so jolly as usual. When he first came in he looked—well, palish, you know, as if he had a bad cold in his head or something. However, he was all right with me, and evidently very glad to have me to talk to, for he invited me to dine with him, and gave me this magnificent tip when I went away."

"Perhaps I had better take the book and his note to Emmie now. She is packing her new box in the spare

room, and she is to drink tea this last night in the Land of Beulah. I will find her before she goes up."

It had all come about in what seemed such an amazingly short space of time, so many events and propositions following each other, that Emmie, the person chiefly concerned, had hardly yet taken in all that was involved in them. On the day after Emmie's return home, Dr. Urquhart had been sent for to Eccleston Square in haste, and brought back alarming news of Lady Rivers, who had been seized with an attack of hæmorrhage from the lungs after an agitating conversation with her daughter. Some days of real anxiety followed, and then, as amendment set in, the necessity of Lady Rivers leaving England and spending some months in a warmer climate began to be talked of. Next came the day when Mrs. West was summoned to a conference with Sir Francis Rivers in Eccleston Square, from which she returned pale and agitated, saying that Sir Francis had almost put her sister's life into her hands by assuring her that Lady Rivers would only consent to leave home on condition that her niece Emmie was allowed to accompany her, while Alma remained to complete her London season under her sister's chaperonage. Aubrey's nomination to Christ's Hospital had not, in reality, been offered as a bribe, for Sir Francis had previously been working to obtain it; but success came at the moment when he made his request for the loan of Emmie, and Mr. West chose to feel that it laid an obligation upon the whole family from which they could not escape. When the matter was put before him he said he would not accept Sir Francis's favours without paying the equivalent prescribed; and, hearing this, Emmie and her mother exchanged glances, and knew in their hearts that the thing was settled and nothing left for either of them to say. An education for one of the boys must not be refused or imperilled by any crossing of Mr. West's mood.

Sir Francis was liberal beyond expectation in all the arrangements that followed, and everybody told Mrs. West and Emmie that this price they were paying for Aubrey's advantage was no sacrifice, but a great piece of good luck. They were too busy to investigate their own

impressions on the subject closely, and said very little to each other about the approaching separation even during the last day's packing. They talked, as loving people on the eve of a parting do talk, of trifles which concerned the common life, tenderly making believe that absence would not snap the close threads of union. They made over Casabianca's new shirts to the last button, and laid little plans for brightening Harry's evenings and consoling Mildie for the loss of her school lessons. Then, when Emmie was laying her new dress on the top of her box and nothing further remained to be done, Mrs. West spoke a few tender words of counsel, and love, and sorrow, taking care all the while that the slow tears, creeping down her cheeks should not fall on the pretty frills and flounces Emmie's fingers were smoothing out, and they kissed across the box and clung mutely together over this symbol of parting, till Mr. West's evening knock was heard at the door. It brought a pang to Emmie with the thought of how far she would be away when it came on the next evening, and it sent Mrs. West away in haste, to be at her post when her husband came in. He would not say anything to-night about Emmie's approaching departure, but perhaps (so Mrs. West thought) he would grieve over it more than anyone else in the house, for did not the worst part of every trouble come upon him, and ought not he to be supremely pitied by her at least?

Emmie sat down on the floor after her mother left her, to wipe away her tears and get herself ready for the Land of Beulah. Tears had been very near her eyes all day, yet it cannot be denied that the grey web of her regrets was crossed by a great many bright threads of hope and expectation. The mere fact of being seated here to-night, with a fire lighted in the spare room expressly for her, and an air of excitement pervading the whole house on her account, caused some pleasant stirrings of emotions. Beyond lay thoughts and hopes, and eager glances into the future, which during the press of late occupations she had kept at bay. She now confessed to herself that after the interest of that one fortnight spent at the Rivers's she should have found it difficult to sink back altogether into Saville Street life, and never to know the end and

real meaning of some events she had there taken part in. Now she should at all events be in the way of hearing, and might perhaps get to understand the drift of Eccleston Square politics in the end. Could Casabianca's ears have served him rightly? Could Alma have decided so, and what influence had her own presumptuous meddling had on her decision?

Here instead of thoughts came visions, and Emmie was back in Eccleston Square, looking down over the balusters on a nodding bird-of-paradise feather and on the upturned face of a young man following behind. She could read clearly the character revealed in those keen, inquisitive eyes, that large, smiling, self-sufficient mouth, those boastful open nostrils, and that square chin, and she knew quite well, if Alma did not, the little there was to like in it, and the much to shrink from instinctively; and as she mentally gazed the wonder grew. How could Alma choose so? Would there ever be an end of her wondering, even while she kept her memory clear from the picture of another face which she could never bear, even in thought, to put by the side of that one, the idea of their being rivals giving her always a glow of indignation hard to keep within reasonable bounds? But what, after all, was Alma's choice to her, and what possible right had she to be angry about it, or to grieve for the pain it must have brought someone who would perhaps lay a part of the blame to her officiousness?

Just as Emmie's thoughts reached this point, Mildie opened the bedroom door, bringing in a stream of gas-light from the passage, and something in her hand, which Emmie discovered to be a letter when her dreaming eyes recovered their power of seeing, and she had brought herself back to Saville Street again.

"Are you not dressed yet?" cried Mildie. "The tea has gone into the Land of Beulah already, and Dr. Urquhart came in half an hour ago. Here's a letter and a parcel for you, which Mr. Anstice left at the door. I did not think it worth while to bring them up whilst you were busy packing."

"Fetch me a candle then, please," said Emmie, "and I will dress here, without going upstairs again."

But Emmie did not wait for the candle to open her

letter: as soon as Mildie was safely out of the room she coaxed up a blaze from the red embers, tore open the envelope, and read:

“DEAR MISS WEST,

“I called in Saville Street two days ago, in the hope of seeing you, and—shall I confess it?—of hearing from you the truth of a report that had reached me of serious illness in your uncle’s house. I thought the illness might account for my not having received an answer to a letter sent there more than a week ago, and I trusted to your kindness to throw all the light on my suspense your superior knowledge could give. Judge of my disappointment at not finding you. In default of his elders, Casabianca entertained me with an exposition of his views on things in general, among which I picked up, not what I wanted to hear certainly, but at all events the end of my suspense. There is simply no more to be said, and I am egotistical once more to you because I think, having gone so far in self-betrayal, it is better to make an end, and to assure you, once for all, that the failure of the enterprise you put me upon in no way detracts from my gratitude to you for holding me worthy of it. Let us both forget that we ever took upon ourselves to judge Mr. Horace Kirkman, junior, and try to believe a certain person’s discernment greater than ours. May your cousin be happy in the choice she has made, and may you suffer as little from Mrs. Kirkman’s vicarious affection as circumstances will admit of. I should like to have seen you before you left England, but I must not monopolise your time at home, now so short—the more as I am not without hope of seeing something of you during your banishment. The house to which, as I hear from your brother, you are going, belongs to a relative of mine, and it must have been my talk in old times of the charms and advantages of La Roquette that induced Lady Rivers to fix upon it as a winter residence for herself and you. My cousin, Madame de Florimel, lives in a tumble-down old château at the foot of the hill on which the châlet you will inhabit is perched, and the visit she expects from me once in two years or so is about due now. Perhaps I shall escape

there from this region of Kirkmans and east-windy thoughts, should they become too oppressive when Easter arrives, and we shall meet at La Roquette and talk London gossip among the anemones and daffodils, which by that time will have overrun all the valleys, where you will be quite at home when I see you next. Did you not say, when we were capping verses at Christmas, and Miss Moore could not understand your not being ready with a line for 'daffodils,' that you did not know Wordsworth well because you had never had him of your own? Here he is in a small enough compass to fit into a chance corner of your travelling-box, and I bring him in case you should find room for him at the last.

"Your sincere Friend,

"WYNYARD ANSTICE."

"What does he say, Emmie? What is the letter about?" asked Mildie, who, candle flaming in hand, stood staring down into Emmie's face, as she reached the last line. "Why, I do believe there's a tear on your cheek. Dear Emmie, you will let me read the letter, won't you? I do so want to know the sort of things people write when they are crossed in love and very miserable. Does he threaten to die and come to Alma's wedding-breakfast like Alonzo the Brave, with worms creeping out of his eyes? I'm sure I wish he would, and that you and I might be there as bridesmaids, and see the Rivers's and Kirkmans properly served out at last. You will let me read some part of the letter at all events, won't you?"

Emmie had it safe back in its envelope by this time.

"Mr. Anstice writes to me about La Roquette, the place in France where we are going," she answered with dignity. "He has French relations, and one of them lives in an old château there, close to the house Uncle Rivers has taken for us to stay in."

"A château," sighed Mildie. "How much happier most people are than ourselves; if I had a relation living in a real old château, I should not mind what happened to me—no, not if I were crossed in love fifty times. Dear Emmie, since you won't give me Mr. Anstice's

letter to read, let me at least put his book into your box, and finish off the ends of the packing, while you go and enjoy yourself in the Land of Beulah. To-morrow at this time I shall not have even such pleasant occupation as packing; I shall be making tea for the boys in the back parlour, without you, completely miserable."

CHAPTER XVI.

"HUSH."

Think not thou canst sigh a sigh,
And thy Maker is not by :
Think not thou canst weep a tear,
And thy Maker is not near.

Oh ! He gives to us His joy,
That our grief He may destroy :
Till our grief is fled and gone
He doth sit by us and moan.

To enter Mrs. Urquhart's apartments from any other part of the house was to pass from noise and excitement to peace and sunshine, and Emmie felt a hush fall on her spirit the instant she crossed the threshold. Not that she was altogether wrong in supposing that the general agitation had for once just touched the still atmosphere of the Land of Beulah, and brought something new into the faces and manner of the friends who welcomed her there, but it was a soothing something, that flattered her with a sense of importance without saddening her. The fire was coaxed into such clear burning as only skill like Mrs. Urquhart's could coax a London fire. The tea-service of dainty china and bright silver sparkled with cleanliness, not due certainly to manipulations of Mary Ann's, and the faces round the table reflected the brightness. Dr. Urquhart might, indeed, be a little preoccupied, for once or twice, when Emmie suddenly turned towards him, she found, to her surprise, that he was gazing rather intently on her. Could he be noticing the red rims round her eyes, and did he know what caused them? Emmie looked away into the depths of the fire, and tried to comfort herself with the reflection that the most skilful of physicians, though he might spy out

quickly the tokens of tears, could not penetrate to the cause from which the tears sprang. Mrs. Urquhart was luckily less observant than her son. She chatted on through the silence of the two others, about the laudatory notice of Graham's lectures she had just spied out in the "Lancet," and by-and-by, Dr. Urquhart woke up and joined in the conversation after his usual manner, with a good deal of playful banter of his mother, and then a question or remark, which tended to draw the talk away from personal matters, and give Emmie a chance of taking her share.

She did not avail herself of it frequently, such a bewildering clatter of voices seemed to be going on in her mind, all telling her different things about to-morrow, and all, as it seemed to her, trying to drown a persistent small voice, that somewhere in a far corner of her brain would go on saying softly over and over again—"Among the anemones and daffodils in the spring"—"Among the anemones and daffodils in the spring." This was February, and even in England daffodils "take the winds of March." Emmie knew enough of Shakespeare to remember that. A month—six weeks—to wait, and then—— no, she would not make that calculation again; her mother was crying downstairs over a different scale of reckoning the weeks. How could she be so heartless as to feel as if the arrival of one London acquaintance at La Roquette would annul the pain of separation from everyone at home? She determined to put the notion from her and attend to what Dr. and Mrs. Urquhart were saying. They had travelled to the South of France in their talk now, and were congratulating her on all the new sights and sounds she would experience—nightingales, fireflies, cicadas.

Tea is over, and Mrs. Urquhart looks a shade surprised, when Dr. Urquhart lingers on, leaving a pile of notes unexamined on his writing-table, while he takes botanical dictionaries, volumes of natural history, from his shelves, to show Emmie engravings of flowers and insects she will soon have an opportunity of admiring in their natural state. How delightedly Mildie would have picked up the information that drops from his lips, quite unpremeditatedly, and only because there is such a store

within that it must come out when not suppressed, and how difficult it is to Emmie to care just then as much about the migratory caterpillar and the edible green frog as she knows she ought to care. He perceives the lack of interest at last, and subsides, with a sigh, into the inner-room to his writing-table and letters and reading-lamp. There, partially hidden by the curtains that hang from the arch between the rooms, he can still hear the murmur of voices by the hearth. He leans back in his chair every now and then between reading and answering a note, perhaps to cogitate his reply, perhaps to get a peep at the talkers, and think, as he watches the changes on Emmie's face, that his mother has found something to say to her which interests her more than the green frog. When he has come to his last note, he indulges himself in a longer spell of watching. Mrs. Urquhart has laid down her particoloured knitting, and has folded one of Emmie's little hands in hers.

"Yes, my dear," she is saying, "a *first* visit from home is an important crisis to a girl. Dear me, nothing else in after life is ever quite like it. It may be—it is likely to be—the beginning of all her real life. Perhaps I'm a silly old woman, who expects every girl she sees to have the same experience as herself, but talking of this journey of yours somehow sets me upon recollecting the first time I ever left my home. I had led a quieter life than even you, my dear, in a little Scotch manse in the North, where we never saw a fresh face from year's end to year's end, and my first visit was made to cousins who lived in Edinburgh. What a packing up it was! How my mother stitched at my clothes, and what a prayer my good father made over me at family worship the last evening. The whole village was stirred up, and there was quite a little crowd to see me set off by the coach in the morning. Our laird, who made the journey the same day, and had promised to look after me, sneered a little at all the tears and excitement, telling me I should be back in a few weeks, feeling just the same as before I went, and that I should wonder then what all the commotion had been about. He was mistaken, however. I did return home at the end of a six weeks' visit; but Dr. Urquhart, my Dr. Urquhart, not the imitation one

you see there, followed me to the manse before the week was out, and well, my dear, the old quiet home-life was over for me after that. Plenty of struggle and trouble came after, but I don't think I ever for one moment of the struggling time wished that I had not travelled to Edinburgh that particular winter. Things of the kind will occur, I suppose, when a girl goes out into the world from a quiet home; there is always a chance that it is her fate she goes to meet, and I can only say I hope your luck will be as good as mine, if you chance to come across yours before we sit here again, Emmie, my dear."

"Mother! what are you talking about,—hush!"

The two heads, confidentially approaching each other, turned in surprise towards the direction whence the words came,—Dr. Urquhart was standing in the opening between the rooms, looking very much shaken out of his ordinary composure: there was an actual flash of anger in his eyes, and his fresh healthy cheeks were a great many shades redder than usual. Mrs. Urquhart gazed at him silently for a minute over her spectacles. She had not been silenced in such a peremptory tone since the date of her Edinburgh journey.

"My dear Graham," she said at last, "why should I be silent? What business is it of yours what I say to Miss West? We thought you were too much occupied with your letters to heed what nonsense we women please to talk to each other."

Dr. Urquhart had now reached the fireplace, and was facing his mother, with the gleam of displeasure still in his grey eyes.

"It is my business," he said, in a low tone. "I cannot hear you suggesting to Miss West the possibility of coming back changed to her old friends without putting in a word of remonstrance. I wonder at you, mother."

"But why should you care?" cried Emmie, turning innocent wide-open eyes upon him. "Of course it was only nonsense we were talking. I don't want any change. Nothing will happen to me. I shall come back just the same—liking and disliking the same people that I like and dislike now. You will see."

"Shall I?—That is enough," said Dr. Urquhart, turning from his mother to Emmie, with all the anger

cleared away from his face, and a strange happy trembling of the lip, and twinkling of the eyes, noticeable there instead.

Mrs. Urquhart cleared her throat very loudly, and began ostentatiously to count the stitches of her knitting.

"It is just folly to pretend to prophesy how you will feel when you come back, before you have ever gone away," she said, severely, when she had come to the end of a row.

"I was not prophesying, was I?" asked Emmie, a little taken aback at the impression her common-place remark had evidently made on her two auditors. "I don't think I meant to prophesy anything."

"No, no!" said Dr. Urquhart in a hurried voice, through which a timid joyfulness pierced. "It was, if I may be allowed to say so, more of a promise than a prophecy; it is a question of present feeling—of knowing our own minds."

"Which you young things always fancy you do when you don't," said Mrs. Urquhart, beginning diligently to count again.

Emmie's cheeks burned uncomfortably, as she sat in a silence that followed, wondering what she could have said or done amiss, and when the clock in the back room opportunely broke the stillness, by striking nine, she jumped up much relieved, and pleaded the early start to-morrow morning, and the number of little last things that remained to be done, in excuse for an early leave-taking. She fancied that Mrs. Urquhart's farewell kiss was somewhat less cordial than her welcoming one had been, and that Dr. Urquhart tried to make up for his mother's unwonted coldness by following her to the door, and holding her hand in a long farewell shake, while he promised to look after her mother's health until her return. When once the door of the Land of Beulah was shut behind her, however, she had too many other things to think of, to trouble herself further about any strangeness there might have been in the manners of her two friends that night. She would have been extremely surprised, if she had known how nearly the Land of Beulah ceased to be the Land of Beulah, on her account, after she left it.

Dr. Urquhart walked straight to his own end of the

room, when he had taken leave of Emmie, and as he stood by his writing-table sealing his notes, and putting them ready for the late post, his mother's ear detected the sound of a softly-whistled tune, breaking out again and again :

My love she's but a lassie yet.

It was a sound she had not heard for years, and which she could not think seemly from the lips of a physician in such growing repute as Dr. Graham Urquhart. Then, with the bundle of notes in his hand, he came and stood again by the fireplace, not speaking, but looking at the red embers with a provokingly happy smile on his face. A true Urquhart smile, made up of confident hopefulness, and a touch of self-complacency as well. Such a smile as had sometimes vexed Mrs. Urquhart's soul when, on a face, of which this was the *facsimile*, it had confronted her in moments of disturbance in her early married life. She hardly knew what to make of herself when she felt the old impatience stirring again, and found a sneer curling her old lips, as she marked the contented curve into which her son's had fallen.

"What was the foolish lad so pleased about? What nonsense was he getting into his head now?"

The clock struck again before either spoke, and then it was Dr. Urquhart, who started, for he thought it was about five minutes since he shook hands with Emmie, and had not the least conception that his mother had been looking at him disapprovingly for exactly half an hour. He even lighted and brought her bedroom candle, and stooped to give her the never-omitted good-night kiss, before he perceived the disquiet in her face, and became aware that there was something wrong.

"Mother!" he exclaimed. For a minute they stood looking at each other, and Mrs. Urquhart, though she would not withdraw her eyes from his, felt as if the Land of Beulah was crumbling round her. "Are you really very angry with me for interrupting your talk with Miss West just now?" he asked. "Have not I a right to my share of talk with her as well as you?"

"It was very ill-judged, Graham," Mrs. Urquhart began, quite relieved that the opportunity of speaking her mind had come so soon. "It does not signify what

an old woman like myself says to a girl; but when you strike in you make it serious. If you did but know how you looked when you came stalking down upon us from the inner room."

"I looked very ridiculous, I daresay; one generally does when one is very much in earnest; but, mother, you are generally so quick at guessing. Don't you understand why I could not bear to hear you put such a notion into her head? She is such a child, she has no thought yet, but for her own people and her own home. I am letting her go without a word, trusting to her coming back as simple-hearted as she went, and I hear you calmly suggesting a possibility I have not allowed myself to think of—that I could not bear!"

"Graham! And you say yourself that 'she is a mere child.'"

"The dearest, the loveliest, the most perfect in the world. My wife and your daughter in the years to come—please God, mother—if only we have her safe back again."

Dr. Urquhart was not really a vain man, only a little over-hopeful, as early successful people are apt to be, and it did not occur to him, that a simple little childish heart like this might be the one good thing in the world—the one prize, that, for all his other triumphs, was beyond his winning. He did not think of that, and having spoken those two fateful words, so sacred to him, he drew up his head, winking a little moisture perhaps from his eyes, but proud and smiling.

Mrs. Urquhart sank down into her chair quite overwhelmed. She had fancied she wished her son to fall in love and marry. She had even been planning magnanimously for Katherine Moore, at some quite distant date—a sensible, reliable, not too beautiful young woman, (for Mrs. Urquhart was of Mr. Caxton's opinion as to the middling style of beauty desirable in one's son's wife,) she could, she thought, have put up with that. But a child with a pink and white face like Emmie West; an impulsive kittenish young thing, who came to her room, not two days ago, to borrow a thimble, confessing that her own had been missing for a fortnight; to give up the mending of her son's linen, and the first place in his

affection to such charge as that—and not at a vaguely distant day either! Old as she was, Mrs. Urquhart had too vivid a recollection of scenes following on her Edinburgh journey to be in doubt, when signs of the real, true feeling were before her eyes. Yes, yes,—Love, with all his youthful unrest, and all his jealous pangs and cloudy distractions, had come to-night into the Land of Beulah; but was it the Land of Beulah any longer, or only a hilly part of the journey where Apollyon had to be met and conquered once more? Mrs. Urquhart pressed her hands hard down on the arms of her chair, and turned her head away. She was naturally a warm-tempered, jealous-hearted woman, and had had hard struggles with herself in past times. But she was used to victory. In five minutes it was all over. Apollyon had put his dart back again into the sheath, and spread his broad wings for flight, worsted for the last time, and sweet breaths from the Heavenly Hills were blowing tranquillity and peace about her old heart again. Was not her own Love waiting for her there, beyond the river? Could she be so base as to grudge this good son a free choice of his?

“Dear little Emmie West!” she said softly. “How I wish I had given her a second kiss to-night—a mother’s kiss! Well, we will both be in the way to see her to-morrow morning, before she leaves the house, and whenever the time comes, as of course it will come, as soon as we have her here again, and you bring her to me for my blessing, there will be a warm welcome ready for her. She’s too good a daughter not to make a good wife for you, my son, and though she did not of course intend it, she showed plainly enough to-night which way her inclination was going.”

“You think so really, mother? You make me very happy.”

And when Mrs. Urquhart, afraid of a relapse if she were obliged to listen to any further raptures this evening, stretched out her hand for her bed-candle, she received the most affectionate embrace from her son she had had since the night of her widowhood, when he put his boyish arms round her and offered her the devotion of his young life to make up for her desolation. Of course

she had known all along that the hour of her dethronement would come, she would have been quite miserable if it had never come, and now that it was here a little soon, she felt that the one thing to be done was to strip herself of every valued possession still her own, and cast all at the feet of her supplanter. What had she good enough to offer to Emmie West, to the person who had won her son's heart from her?

As she felt too much excited when she got into her own room to prepare for rest at once, she seated herself before her dressing-table and began an elaborate inspection of old treasures, to discover something that might be sacrificed to her rival to-morrow. Should it be the wonderful cairngorm brooch that Graham had bought for her after their first separation with the savings of his school allowance, or the solid gold pencil-case that represented his first fee, or that dearer treasure yet, the old-fashioned locket in which her husband had put the first baby lock of hair? No, that must be a later gift. It was dedicated to-night, but reserved for the bridal morning. The cairngorm brooch should be offered first. And then Mrs. Urquhart put on her strongest spectacles and wrote a neat little note to be slipped with the brooch into Emmie's hand next morning; wondering, as she laboriously picked her phrases to make them cordial enough, that a disciplined heart should have such clinging roots round earthly possessions still, and yield the first place so grudgingly.

If her ears had been quick enough, or if she could have seen through the ceiling of her room on to the balcony of the story above, her sense of loneliness would have been lessened, for she would have discovered that another heart in that house to-night was going through the self-same struggle. A novice learning her first lesson out of the great book of sacrifice in which women graduate for heaven, instead of a veteran spelling out the finis to which she had arrived.

Mildie was the fellow-sufferer. The evening had been a very trying one for her. All the boys, including Harry, had been out of spirits, and consequently captious with her tea-making, and after tea came an order from Mr. West for a general turn out of the

common stock of school-books, that the most available specimens might be set aside for Aubrey to take to school with him. Harry presided over the business, but of course Mildie could not keep herself from hovering near her treasures, and smarting under a keen sense of injustice as she heard one after another of her favourites disposed of without any reference to her claims on them. Mildie's Euclid was it, bought with her own money? Well, it was the only decent one among the lot. She must give it up, and be content with Casa's old one. What could it matter to her if the second half of the third book was torn out? She would never get anything like so far with no one to help her. The Latin Dictionary that had lost all its D's and its L's, might stay on the school-room shelf. The Gentle Lamb was going to eave off Latin and sink to the commercial school after Easter, and as for Mildie, she was only learning for her own amusement. It could not signify if she had to guess all the words beginning with D or L for the rest of her life. A girl's Latin translations were sure to be rum enough, Casa opined, whatever sort of dictionary she used.

To wind up the insults and injuries of the evening, Mildie was requested, quite good-naturedly, for no one had noticed her sufferings, to write Aubrey's name and address legibly in the first page of each of these books—her books that she had valued and used so much more diligently, and to so much better purpose than anybody else in the house—and then to take them and put them away in his room to be packed in his new school-box to-morrow. She did it, mentally comparing herself to a Carthaginian mother dropping her children through the hands of Moloch; but on leaving Casa's attic, she felt she could not go downstairs again to look at the ravished book-shelves and be badgered by the boys for her red eyes. What remotest corner of the house should she rush to, to have a good cry and ease her angry heart? Members of large families in crowded houses find the luxury of grief as difficult of attainment sometimes as other luxuries generally supposed to be more costly. Mildie

could think of only one spot, where she could secure five minutes' solitude and freedom to look as she liked and sob as loudly as she pleased without provoking criticism.

This spot was rather a summer's than a winter's retreat—a certain level bit of the leads at the back of the house, to which there was access by a little door in one of the attic rooms. The night was cold and there was snow on the roof, but what did that matter? Mildie threw a shawl over her head, pushed the little door hard, and emerged among a forest of chimney-pots. She soon made her way among them to the spot she had in her mind, and then stood still. The novelty of the scene in its winter aspect drew her thoughts from herself at first, and checked the tears she had come to shed. Far below were the gaslights, stretching up and down the narrow back street, and a file of men and women drudging past them, through the black slush to which the morning's snow had been trampled; but around her still lay patches of dazzling white mixed with red gables and yawning black chimneys, and over all stretched a sky of thin cloud, silvered in one spot with frosty moonlight. Dictionaries and Euclids did not look so all important here in this wide white-and-black world as they had looked in the school-room below, but Mildie was not disposed to let go her hold on her grievance so easily. Hers was not a romantic sorrow, like that of a young girl wounded in her first secret love, but perhaps she felt quite as forlorn and sore-hearted as any love-sick maiden, and she had come up here to have it out with herself.

It was hard, yes, it was hard—and no one saw the hardship. She was the only person in the family who cared for study, and she was robbed of her opportunities and turned into a drudge without anyone so much as acknowledging that it was a sacrifice. Her life was taken up and folded away in the dark, that other people might do as they pleased with theirs—Alma marry a rich man, and Emmie travel abroad with Aunt Rivers, and Casa enjoy privileges he would make nothing of; and all the time Mildie had thoughts and ambitions in that rough

head of hers such as would never come to any of them. She knew it well enough, though she knew also that she should be laughed utterly to scorn by everyone if she were even to hint at anything of the kind. Oh, it did seem hard, and now the tears came in a plentiful rain, and Mildie crossed her arms on the wet parapet, quite heedless of damage to the wrap in which she had folded them, and laid her face down and sobbed out her moan. Stormy, heart-shaking sobs at first, dying down into gentler heavings of her breast against the grimy wet parapet she had chosen to weep upon.

"Hush, hush!"

The sound seemed to come out of the air and dropped into Mildie's ears, half soothingly, half remonstratingly, in rough, but loving tones.

"Hush, then, hush!"

She raised her head and looked over the parapet. The words were being spoken down there. A woman was leaning against the railings of an area below, resting for a moment while she tried to readjust her burden, a wailing child, so as to give it a warmer fold of a ragged shawl in which her half-naked bosom and it were wrapped together.

"Hush, dear, hush!"

It was a softer whisper now, soft, almost satisfied, for the child's cries were stilled; and Mildie, from her station above, saw the mother pull herself upright and set out on her way again, staggering and swaying under her load, from weakness and weariness, but plodding on and on down the dim street, through ice and mire, till darkness and distance swallowed her up.

How long had she been carrying that baby, and how far, Mildie vaguely wondered. How her arms must ache, and yet how closely they clasped their burden round.

There was something more in Mildie after all than the pert pedantic school-girl she appeared to outsiders. She could understand other things besides languages and mathematics, and get glimpses, sometimes in irregular ways, into matters that her studies did not touch at all. She could not have explained to Casabianca why that woman's "Hush!" and the sight of her burdened figure plodding on down the comfortless street, took all the

anger and pain out of her heart, and suddenly elevated household drudgery far above learning, into a kind of glorious martyrdom indeed, which had no shade of bitterness in it; yet such was the effect it had on her. She no longer felt injured or solitary—there were other burden-bearers, more than enough. Was one a woman for anything else? Mildie saw it all in a flash of lightning, and something else too loomed up vague and grand in her thoughts to be pondered over till it grew clear in after years. The woman-born, who called Himself the chief bearer of burdens, was it not in virtue of nearness to Him that the call to bear burdens for others, unthanked and unnoticed, came so often to women? Was there anything really greater? Was it not being called to sit in the highest room, nearest to the Giver of the Feast?

Mrs. Urquhart would have been content with her fellow-struggler's progress in her first lesson, if she could have read the thoughts that busied Mildie's brain as she crept back through the low door into the house again, and set herself to wash the grimy marks from her dress at the sink in the housemaid's closet. It was cold there; but Emmie and her mother were still talking in the bedroom, and Mildie resolved not to disturb them by bringing her own uncomfortable self into their presence before it was necessary.

When she crept into the room at last, all was quiet, and Emmie was kneeling by her bedside, lingering a little longer than usual, this last night, over her evening prayers. For the last week or so, since a certain conversation with Alma, Emmie had added a clause to her petitions for relations and friends which had Alma's name in it, a prayer hardly worded but breathed low—that when the time came Alma might be led to make Somebody happy—or rather kept from giving him such pain as Emmie knew of. To-night she paused over the words, for she remembered suddenly that it was too late to frame such a petition now. It was all over, and Alma had put it out of her power to give joy or pain to that person more. There was, as he had phrased it himself, "nothing more to be said." The recollection brought Emmie's prayers to a hasty conclusion. She jumped up

and hurried to bed, for she was conscious that a great throb had come to her heart with that certainty, a throb of triumph, not of pain, and it frightened her to find that such a feeling had come from such a cause.

CHAPTER XVII.

SNOWDROPS.

There is no time like Spring,
When life's alive in everything,
Before new nestlings sing,
Before deft swallows speed their journey back
Along the trackless track—
God guides their wing,
He spreads their table that they nothing lack—
Before the daisy grows a common flower,
Before the sun has power
To scorch the world up in his noontide hour.

To enjoy a walk through Kensington Gardens as Christabel Moore enjoyed hers one soft February afternoon a week after Emmie left England, one must have lived for a year at least in a close quarter of London; one must have had a good deal of anxious hard work to do there, and perhaps added to this, one must be young, and an artist, and a dreamer with an untroubled heart, like Christabel.

One thing is certain that the touch of the sun-warmed wind on her cheek, and the fresh, growing smell from the borders, and the tremulous quiver of life in the slender branch-tips against the sky, transported Christabel into a world of rapture where not many people could have followed her. Katherine could not. She would have enjoyed a leisurely walk beneath the budding trees, and noted all the tokens of reviving vegetation more minutely perhaps than Christabel, but she would have seen a good many other things too that would somewhat have spoiled the spring poetry for her. The pinched, pale faces of the group of children, hunting among that heap of dead leaves for a possible last year's chestnut, the staggering gait of the man who had just left the seat by the pond and wandered away among the

trees, the hunchbacked figure crutching itself slowly down the broad walk.

The human side of the picture would have been too prominent with Katherine to permit her to revel in the natural beauty; but Christabel was endowed with the fair gift of seeing everywhere just what she chose to see, one aspect of things at a time, and that so intently as to shut out all else, even herself, from her thoughts.

To-day, she was not merely in Kensington Gardens, she was walking through a bridal chamber, and seeing the newly-awakened earth deck herself in the fairest of her many robes to receive her bridegroom's greeting kiss—that vesture of faintest, tenderest green, which in England, nature puts on for a day or two at the opening of the year and lays aside in tears, never to be resumed again, when her bridegroom, summer, disappoints her and delays his coming. No touch of the evanescent glory was lost on Christabel; her eyes greedily drank in all the delicate colouring, the pale sunshine, the pearly-grey shadows, the misty haze of green in which the black branches of the distant trees seemed to be bathed, the touches of autumn russet lingering here and there, the lovely tints of the clouds reflected in the water. As she looked, her pulse quickened with a vague expectation and hope of coming joy, as if she herself had become a portion of the new activity she felt stirring in all things around her.

It never occurred to her that passers-by might stare to see her stand motionless so long peering down at the common wonder of an open-eyed daisy in the grass. And as she followed with rapture in her eyes the heavy flight of a rook over the roof of Kensington Palace, bearing a twig for the repair of its nest in the venerable rookery behind Holland House, she did not hear the remark “How strange!” which two ladies who had left their carriage at the gate, and were taking a turn down the broad walk, exchanged as they passed her, their long trains almost touching her dusty feet. They even glanced back, when they had walked some distance, to ascertain if she was still standing gazing up at the clouds, so strangely had the intense joy in her small pale face struck them, and so unaccountable did it appear to them, that a

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grown-up person should take such an absorbed interest in the flight of a bird. A shabby person too, whose dark dress—though it was brightened with scarlet ribbons—was made of the commonest materials, and of a style that had not come out of any fashion-book. What reason could she have to be happy because the rooks were building their nests again and spring was coming? Spring could not mean a gay London season for her.

Christabel's soul had followed the rook to its wind-rocked ancestral castle, and wished it success in its building, by the time these observers had done puzzling themselves about her, and then she turned off the walk among the trees, ready for the next pleasure the spring afternoon had to give her. She had a full hour for enjoyment, for a lesson she had come into that part of London to give had been interrupted at its commencement, and as Katherine would not expect her home till the usual time, she could spend the interval in walking about as she pleased. The feel of the grass under her feet carried her thoughts back to other springs, and visions rose of green valleys starred with primroses running up between the velvety or wooded sides of Lancashire hills, but she did not regret them, they were as much hers here as there, for they were a part of the spring in which she was rejoicing.

The sunshine and the west wind were telling her of the growth of flowers somewhere, and that was enough, nay, did not the air even seem to bring her a faint—faint suggestion of the delicate odour of spring flowers? This became so real, that it woke her from her reverie at last, and forced her to notice where she had wandered. She was standing close to the gardener's cottage, near Queen's Gate, and the flowers she had been dreaming about were at her feet—not mountain primroses indeed, but something that for the moment did quite as well for Christabel—a border fenced in, but open to sight, of early snow-drops, with here and there a crocus-bud breaking like a flake of fire among their snow.

The discovery so delighted her that she turned round involuntarily to look for Katherine to share her joy, and her eyes fell on a little child lying asleep close to the railings, through which he had pushed the fingers of one

hand. He had crept away from a group of larger children at play by the pond, tempted by the flowers, and fallen asleep weary with his efforts to reach them.

Christabel stooped down to look at the little white face, and one of those quick impulses that broke in upon her dreamy moods seized her. Poor little human bud that had so much less promise in its opening than the brother flower-buds it had stretched after in vain, what could she do to bring a little touch of springtide pleasure near it?

She had some biscuits in her bag which she had forgotten to eat at luncheon time, and the notion of slipping them into the thin hand that lay stretched out sleepily on the grass, and then stealing out of sight, leaving the little one to open its eyes on the gift without any clue from whence it came, just pleased her fancy. The sleepy fingers clutched the food with the instinct of hunger, and Christabel, stooping down, drew the corner of the child's ragged frock over his hand to hide what it held from any covetous passer-by, then she stood watching till the eyelids that had half opened at her touch closed comfortably, and the even breathing of baby sleep came again.

She was just thinking of moving away, when a voice close behind her said :

"Good afternoon, Miss Moore; is it one of our old friends you have got there, or a 'babe in the wood' that you are covering with leaves? May another robin come and help?"

She turned at the sound of the voice, and her hand was taken and eagerly clasped in another, and she was conscious of a look of extreme pleasure in two handsome grey eyes which met and held hers a second or two before she could think of any word to say in answer.

It was not exactly surprise at the meeting that kept her silent; she had always thought she should meet "Fortunatus" (as she called him in her thoughts) again sometime; it was rather the wonder that comes when an event falls out so exactly as it has been imagined, that it seems a result, or an echo of the thought. If she had spoken out the first words that came to her, she would have said: "So you are really here to-day. I felt as if

you ought to come on such a day as this, and you are here."

Luckily words always lagged very far behind thoughts with her, and her companion was in no hurry for her to speak; he was quite satisfied with what her eyes and the delicate rose flush that spread over her face said as they stood together in the spring sunshine. Even when the greetings were ended, and they were walking side by side, the conversation flowed slowly at first, and they did not for a few minutes look at each other again. Each seemed to be afraid of disturbing the impression of that involuntary meeting gaze which had made questions and answers, greetings and assurances of pleasure in each other's company, so ridiculously poor and unnecessary.

Lord Anstice spoke first.

"Well, I shall always know where to find you for the future. I shall look out for the most miserable, starved, ragged child in London, and stick close to him, and by-and-by you'll appear to give him a surprise."

"I did not know I was such a difficult person to find," said Christabel, shyly.

"You are, however; I have called three times in Saville Street since I got back to London and each time you were out, and on the last occasion I had the door almost slammed in my face by an old dragon who muttered something about lodgers' visitors. After that I invaded your old watchmaker's shop, and tried to pump him about your times and seasons of going out and being at home, but not a word could I drag out of him, though I hung about his place over an hour, and would have bought a chronometer if he would have let me."

"How odd of David! But you quite mistook the way to his heart if you showed even a distant intention of carrying off one of his three chronometers. A reasonable silver hunting watch he might have sold you with pleasure, if he thought you capable of taking care of it, and that you could rightly afford to pay for it, but one of his chronometers that he has been working at half his lifetime,—it would take a long and intimate acquaintance for David to trust you with that, and," glancing up timidly, but yet with a mischievous gleam in her eyes,

"I doubt whether you are exactly the sort of person ever to merit such a mark of confidence from him."

"Why not? Why should not he trust me?"

"The story of Fortunatus's purse would tell terribly against you with David. He is a Scotchman, and a political economist as well, and I have often wondered what he would say of our indiscriminate giving that night. Do you know I have even been a little bit afraid myself that it was wrong—to *you*—I hope——"

Christabel hesitated; and then, looking up into Fortunatus's face, while the colour rushed over her own, she said, earnestly:

"I have often thought about it, and hoped that my recklessness that night did not really inconvenience you—that it has been made up to you some way. Will you tell me if the engagement, the work that has kept you away from London all this time has proved as profitable as I hope it has, and more than made amends for your generosity?"

Her eyes fell from his face as she spoke, and wandered over his person as if half afraid of detecting some sign of privation, and he turned a little away, colouring almost as vividly as she had done.

"Work, oh, it did not make any difference to me! But, Miss Christabel," in a pleased tone, "it was immensely jolly of you to trouble your head as much as all that about me. Nobody else does. You have really been afraid I should miss that money?"

"You must forgive me if I have made a mistake; you see I have not at present any very grand notions of an artist's earnings. My own are not so magnificent as to warrant recklessness, and though I am beginning to have a few friends in my own profession, I don't get much encouragement from their experience. We none of us can boast of rapid success, and did you not tell me you were only a beginner?"

"Only a beginner, as you say; but—these friends of yours," (in a tone of discontent) "you said *we*."

"Why should not I have friends? I am not the only girl in London working at art."

"Oh yes, I see, lady friends. Well, I don't fall in with men friends so easily. I have always been a surly-

tempered, lonely sort of fellow, since I can remember myself, best pleased with my own company. When I was little my mother shut me up, and made a misanthrope of me by way of keeping me out of temptation, and when I came to be my own master, though I broke loose at first, and saw something of the world, the instinct to get back into my shell and follow out my crotchets alone soon came back. I don't like half the world to know what I'm doing. My notion of happiness is to get out of the crowd and feel free, with plenty of space to do what I like, and be what I like, without anyone troubling his or her head about me. I fancy that must be your taste too."

"I am not over six feet high," said Christabel, peeping up at her companion's towering head, and not being able to keep a gleam of the admiration she felt from stealing under her thick eyelashes. "There is no need for me to pine for solitudes. I can creep about low down in a crowd without anybody seeing me."

"I saw you, though. The two millions of people in London could not hide you from me. I found you out. I shall always feel grateful to a crowd for that."

There was a moment's silence, and then Christabel said, with that fine smile of hers, just touched with sarcasm: "Does nothing short of an accident in a crowd force a friend upon you? I should not have given you credit for such resolute reserve, from what I have seen of you."

"What! Because I have talked of myself to you, and, as you think, told you so much about my private concerns? You'll understand the ins and outs of my oddities better some day, and meanwhile I can tell you that it takes a great deal more than an accident in a crowd to make me speak out. It takes *you*—nothing in the world less than that would do it,—and besides I had seen you before the accident, and made up my mind in a minute to see you again if I could."

"You would have found it very hard," said Christabel. "I am a Will-o'-the-Wisp even to myself, and I don't think I am always to be seen at the place where my body is, if you can understand such a thing. I can walk about and talk very fairly well to most people without being *there* at all. I have been doing it all this afternoon, till

first the flowers and then you, brought the two halves of me together."

"Did I not know that as well as you can tell it me? I was watching you for half an hour before I spoke to you, waiting for you to come back. I shall never mind waiting till you are ready to talk; it interests me; and I say, now we have met a second time, we are not going to lose sight of each other for two months again, are we?"

"I don't know," said Christabel, hesitatingly; "we are very busy people, Katherine and I, and we have not much time to give to our friends. I am afraid—I mean I think—it must be, on rare days, Christmas Eves, spring days in the middle of winter like this, that we look for meetings. That is how I think it will be."

"I don't think so. That would not satisfy me. It might suit you well enough, who have lots of friends, all those people you called *we*, but you forget how lonely I am. You will see me a great deal oftener than that now I have come back to London."

"Are you really quite as lonely as you say?" asked Christabel smiling. "You talk of my friends, but there is your cousin, whom all my little Saville Street world are enthusiastic in praising, whom even the magnificent Miss Alma Rivers is said to regard with favour. We have no such hero among our acquaintance, to give us consequence and stand by us in our troubles."

"Wynyard, so people praise him to *you*, do they! Spare me the repetition. He has been thrust upon me all my life by one person or another, and there are reasons why I have always more or less of an uncomfortable feeling when I am with him. I don't mean but that he is a thoroughly good fellow, and I've no doubt I should, as you suggest, take my troubles to him, but for pleasure give me a companion that no one has recommended to me. Why not you and your sister? Why should not you help me through some of my lonely evenings? Why should not you give lessons to me, as well as to your old watchmaker?"

"You would soon find old David a very contentious fellow-pupil, and would tire of sitting among his clocks, listening to his bad French and queer philosophy."

"I did not mean that. I meant why should I not

come to Saville Street on the evenings when you are at home, and have a lesson—say in drawing? There must be lots of things that you could teach me, for I have never found anyone from whom I could learn anything worth learning yet.”

“You ought to be able to draw a great deal better than I do to call yourself an artist at all—but——”

“You will let me come?”

“I will ask Katherine. It is not our own house, you know; we pay a very small rent for our attic-rooms, and we don’t feel that we have a right to bring many visitors, much less a regular pupil to the house; and besides, we think a great deal of ourselves, it is true, but hardly so much as to induce us to undertake you for a scholar.”

“It must be managed somehow; we will never be so long again—two months—without seeing each other.”

Christabel’s smiling eyes fell under the look that went with these words, and they sauntered on under the trees in another pleasant, spell-bound silence, that lasted for many minutes without either finding it awkward. It seemed a waste of time to talk, while the sunshine fell so softly round them, and the certainty of content in each other’s presence had stolen into their hearts, making them tremblingly afraid of perilling their new joy by words that were sure to be less true than the thoughts which seemed to pass unexpressed between them. It might have been an hour, and it might have been five, for any account of time they took, when Christabel found herself close to the gate by which she was accustomed to leave the Gardens on her way to Saville Street, and noticed how long their shadows lay on the gravel walk.

“I must make haste home,” she exclaimed, “Katherine will be there before me, and I don’t like that to happen, for since her accident she has taken to being nervous for me, though never for herself.”

“But home is a long way off, and I am going to call on your sister; our walk does not end here.”

“I am afraid it must. I shall ride home in that red omnibus you see standing there, and I don’t think Katherine would like me to bring a visitor, not even a new pupil, home to-night. She is not quite strong yet, and she will have had an anxious day. She was to see a

friend this afternoon who has undertaken to give her information and advice about the next steps she is to take in following out her medical studies. She fears she has come to an end of the little she can do in England, and the decision she will have heard to-day is all important to us, and will need a great deal of talking over, and perhaps the forming of new plans."

"Not anything that will take you away from London, I hope. Do you know once or twice while I was in Scotland such a horror came over me with the thought that I might never find you again, that I could hardly keep myself from rushing off by the next train to make sure that those wonderful attics and yourself were in the land of reality where I could get at you. You won't vanish away suddenly now that I have found you again?"

"What makes you think of such a thing? I shall go wherever Katherine has to go, of course, but our changes can't be sudden; we could not give up our pupils and our work at once, too much depends on them, as I should think you would know."

"It would be too hard on me, if, when for the first time in my life I have found friends to my mind, they should be whisked away before I have got any good out of them. Shall you be passing through the Gardens at the same hour next week? Since Saville Street seems to be an almost impregnable fortress, I must look out for you here. I shall be sure to meet you here, at all events."

"Yes, at all events," said Christabel, disengaging her hand from the farewell clasp which threatened to be too long. She did not feel quite satisfied with herself when she was in the omnibus on her way back to Katherine, and was able to think quietly over what she had said and looked and felt. She wished, since she could not deny to herself that this unexpected meeting was a great event to her, that she had accepted Fortunatus's offer of companionship home, and given Katherine an opportunity of seeing and understanding once for all the terms of close acquaintanceship into which they two had unaccountably stumbled. She regretted for the hundredth time that small concealment on Christmas Eve, which had made her, so she thought, shy of speaking her artist

friend's name to Katherine, and induced her to hide away, as she had never before hidden thought or feeling from Katherine, the recollections that had been often in her mind: the oftener, perhaps, because she had never spoken them. How could she begin now, and how would Katherine bear the revelation of an interest absorbing her, in whose beginnings she had had no part? Was it really true that such a thing had happened as that she had a separate interest from Katherine? Christabel tried for a time to argue the unwelcome conviction away, but ended by only wishing vehemently that she could feel as free from any personal concern in the discussion of future plans that was to take place this evening as she had felt when she set forth on her day's work. There was no use she found in telling herself that she was free; she must keep her strength for struggling to put the selfish, unshared interest aside, and try to hide from Katherine's tender eyes the anxiety she was herself aware of; the sick eagerness which she feared would make her hang breathless on Katherine's words, and feel as if each wise reason she might bring forward in favour of leaving London was a sentence of banishment, a death warrant to a hope which was already the sum of interest in life to her. What a terrible bondage to have fallen into since morning, and yet the next minute Christabel was smiling to herself: since morning—one little day—and it was possible to live a week, a month, a year, a lifetime of days, every one of which might be rich with the same delight that this one had held.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LETTERS.

When daffodils begin to peer
With heigh! the doxy over the dale;
Why then comes in the sweet o' the year,
For the red blood shines in the winter's pale.

KATHERINE was the first to reach home. While she waited for Christabel, she moved their tea-table from the neighbourhood of the fire to the window-recess,

spread the tea before the open window, and placed a little bunch of violets among the cups and saucers to celebrate, on this first mild evening of the year, a change from their winter to their summer quarters, as important to them as going out of town is to other people. She had finished her arrangements some little time before Christabel appeared, yet she did not, as she had been in the habit of doing lately, greet her entrance with an exclamation of relief. She looked up eagerly indeed from a letter she had just finished reading, but there was some other thought than welcome of Christabel in her face, something so important that it had put ordinary thoughts aside for a while.

"Letters," said Christabel, hurrying up to her, and finding her heart sink with vague foreboding as she looked into Katherine's deep eyes and tried to make out what the unusual expression in them meant. An augury of change, surely, but what of that? Christabel had always hitherto been ready for the next step, not having had any great stake in things as they were, till now. "Letters for us?"

"Yes, indeed; and one that will have a most important bearing on our discussion to-night. I have hardly taken it in yet. At first sight it seems almost too good to be real, and that there must be objections underneath when we come to think it over. But let us have tea first. I had meant this to be our festival of settling into spring habits, and I intended to give our sun-set chimney-pots an affectionate greeting for another summer's contemplation of them, and here comes a reversal of everything. But eat first. What have we to be afraid of, dearest? So long as we keep together, and our plans are progressing, what can it matter whether chimney-pots or snow mountains reflect the sunsets we watch side by side?"

"Snow mountains!" repeated Christabel, slowly. "Then I suppose the result of your inquiries to-day convinces you of the uselessness of remaining longer in London, and that you must seek what you want further away; but I thought it was to be Paris?"

"So it was this morning, but I had come to the con-

clusion just now that for *that* I must wait another whole year. I have consulted my friends, and even had a talk with Dr. Urquhart, who was wonderfully kind, and entered into the matter thoroughly; we won't say for whose sake, but certainly it was not through any special sympathy with my aims. It is perfectly true, as I feared, the one door which let one lady-student through is closed for ever against women in England. My year's private study has given me courage to persevere, and certainty of my own powers of endurance, but it has not advanced me a single step towards my end, and every month longer in London will be lost time. I had come to the sad conclusion that another summer at least must be wasted, for that our funds were not in a condition to allow us to risk such a step as removal to Paris, where we might be long before you got any work, and where, though we might easily find another 'Air Throne,' we should not have such a landlady as Mrs. West, or such friends as the Urquharts: I came home out of heart, thinking that everything was against me. I am not so strong as I used to be since my illness, I think, and just as I was looking at our chimney-pots, and wondering how long the months of another summer of hope deferred would seem, I heard the postman's knock down below, and the next minute up came Mildred West with the letters we are going to read together after tea. You look pale, darling, you have walked too far. Let me see you eat and drink before we say anything more. Oh, when shall I have worked my way up so far that I can put an end to drudgery for you, and make such a home for you as you ought to have?"

"Make me into an idle young lady again, what heresy!" cried Christabel, rousing herself with a great effort to speak lightly.

After tea she brought a stool and placed it so that she could rest her head against Katherine's knee, and hide her face, lest, in the course of the discussion, it should say something she did not want it to say.

"Now for the letters," she began; "there seems to be a budget."

"The thick one is from Emmie West, and when we have settled our own business, we will invite the party

from the back sitting-room downstairs to hear you read it aloud. Mildie is always hanging about looking out for an invitation to come up here, and as our time will be short, perhaps we had better give them all the pleasure we can."

"Oh, Katherine, let me have the other letter at once! Don't play with my anxiety with any more hints about going. Tell me the news at once."

"Directly. It is my own anxiety I am playing with, lest there should turn out to be a flaw in the good news when we come to look at it closely. Do you remember a blind lady with whom we travelled up to London eighteen months ago, to whom I talked a great deal during the journey?"

"Yes—yes; you found a bag her companion had lost, and she seemed to take a liking to you."

"And was interested in my intention of studying medicine. She gave me some introductions, and we exchanged names and addresses when we parted at the station. I wrote once to the address she gave me three months after we settled ourselves here, and now more than a year after comes her answer. Here it is; she writes from Zürich, where she is living in a little house of her own, and you will see she has ascertained that I can take a medical degree there as well as in Paris, and she offers me a home in her house if I like to come and act as her secretary while I am studying. The lady who has lived with her hitherto is going to be married, and if I accept the offer, she wants me to come at once. Read what she says."

There was a little pause, and then Christabel, as she folded the sheet and put it back in Katherine's hand, said in a low voice:

"There is nothing said about me; she seems to have forgotten all about me."

"Dearest, but you don't suppose that even such an immediate prospect as this opens of gaining my great wish could make me forget you for an instant? Don't you see what is said in the postscript about cheap lodgings in the town, if I prefer to have my evenings to myself? And there is the promise of a small salary. This is what we have to consider, whether the money we have in hand

now, will cover our journey to Zürich, and your expenses there for the first three months. After that time you will have got employment, teaching or drawing, and my first quarter's salary will be due, and I shall perhaps be adding something more to our funds by nightwork. Bring out the money-box, and let us count our savings. If we can't make them do, the whole scheme, tempting as it looks, must be given up: but I am sanguine, people live on such small sums abroad, and I for one should feel a dragon's appetite for work, and a giant's strength, if I saw the way to my end so plainly before me."

Christabel shook her head as she rose to comply with Katherine's request. "I will bring the box, dear, but I know the hollowness of its condition better than you do, for I have managed it since you were ill. Perhaps not so cleverly as you would have done. However, let us face the worst."

Bringing the box and pouring its contents on Katherine's knee, she said: "Count out your money, Kitty, before it is too dark to know sovereigns from shillings. There is something more due to me for this term's lessons, but I cannot get hold of that till Easter, and I should perhaps forfeit the greater part of my school fees, if I left suddenly without proper notice."

Some talk and calculation followed, and then Katherine slowly replaced the money, piece by piece, in the box, and locked it.

"Well," said Christabel, putting her hand over Katherine's. It was almost too dark to see, but Christabel felt a large tear fall on the back of her hand from Katherine's eyes. It took a great deal to make Katherine weep. Christabel had to look back to quite childish days for the last time—an occasion when there had been a little quarrel between the sisters—when this had happened.

"I am very foolish," Katherine said faintly, "but I was thinking of what you said one day about the consequences of my accident stretching out so much further than we foresaw at first. If I had not been ill—if even I had not yielded to your entreaties, and bought a warm

dress and cloak for my first going out, I need not have sent the refusal to Zürich that now must go. How little I thought that night, when I held back the man from striking his wife again, that I was knocking over my own best chance of gaining what I had most at heart. Do you remember what you said about the Nornir's thread? We did not know then that there was another great knot in the weaving still to come."

"No," said Christabel. Then she paused, for her thoughts flew off to yet another very differently coloured thread in the web of consequences, and her heart began to beat so quickly that she could not speak. She knew now that the decision which had cost Katherine that bitter tear had been felt as an escape by her—an escape from a pain so great that it actually seemed worse to bear than the sight of Katherine's sorrow. What could she do to atone for such selfishness? Katherine must not be sacrificed for her just now, when conscience told her that the entire exclusive love which had hitherto made the utmost sacrifice for each other seem only natural, was beginning on her side to have a flaw in it.

Katherine rose to return the treasure-box to its usual place, and so end the conversation, but Christabel put out her hand, and drew her back into her chair. "Wait a minute, dear, I have something to say to you. Katherine, you must not give up Zürich. This offered help is the turning-point of your life, the one chance of success that you can hardly hope to have again if you turn away from it now."

"I acknowledge that," answered Katherine, mournfully; "but——"

"Listen to me. You must go alone to Zürich and live with Miss Campbell as she proposes till you receive your first quarter's salary, and till I have fulfilled my engagements with my present pupils. Then it might be prudent for me to join you. Yes, we must separate for a little while."

"What are you talking of? We have never been parted in our lives. To leave you alone! I could not bear it."

"Mothers and daughters have to part, and husbands and wives sometimes," said Christabel, laying her cheek

caressingly against Katherine's knee; "they live through the time."

"You could bear it, then?" asked Katherine, almost in a tone of reproach.

"For your good; to help forward your career that we have planned so often; that we went out together into the world to achieve."

"You frighten me," exclaimed Katherine. "If I could leave you to work alone here—you—my little sister whom I promised my mother on her death-bed to watch over, I should fear that I had really grown hard and selfish, that I had let ambition for a career eat the womanliness out of me."

"I thought we held that women could take care of themselves and did not want any watching over?" said Christabel, falteringly.

Some warning words of old Mrs. Urquhart's recurred to Katherine's memory as Christabel spoke, and sent a sudden pang through her. A sense of the terribleness of life, unless the threads of its circumstance were indeed held in a heavenly Father's hand, came over her, and she hid her face in her hands, shuddering.

She must be changed since her accident, she said to herself, if such a shudder could come on hearing a boast from Christabel that used to sound so natural. Was it her nerves merely that had been shattered, or was her self-confidence leaving her, or were the foundations on which she had stood in fancied security hitherto, breaking away to make room for something else? Perhaps just now Christabel's sense and judgment might be the most trustworthy; and Christabel was all the while talking on soothingly, mingling her arguments with caresses and gentle raillery at the inconsistency of Katherine's reluctance.

"I shall be the worst of the two, when the time of parting comes," she said. "You will have to scold me into courage, then, but while it is still three or four days distant I am as brave as you will be at the last. I can see clearly what is the reasonable thing to do. You talk of leaving me alone, but it is not the same as it would have been last year. I have friends. I shall not be lonely."

"There are Mrs. West and Mrs. Urquhart who would be kind," said Katherine, in a calmer tone; "but they are too much occupied with business and cares of their own to bestow thought on you, and now Emmie is away there will be no one to help you through your lonely evenings."

"But I have made a few friends of my very own," said Christabel. "My two neighbours at the drawing-school walk home with me sometimes and press me to visit them, and" (hurrying out the words) "I met another friend to-day in Kensington Gardens, that Mr. Anstice, who helped you on the day of the accident, and came to see us when you were ill. He is back in London, and talks of calling here. Oh, I shall have more visitors while you are away than Mary Ann will consent to open the door to. You have no notion how gay I mean to be, I shall perhaps turn out a leader of society in Bohemia when I am left to myself."

"You talk bravely, dearest; but I am afraid you have no notion of the difference between depending on chance acquaintances for society, and such companionship as we have had together day by day."

"It will be three months' starving, I know," said Christabel, "but think of the joy of meeting again. I want you really to understand that it will not be so bad for me as you suppose. Spring is coming on, and you know how light-hearted I always feel in the spring. Every fresh flower will tell me that the time for our meeting is nearer, and you will send me thick letters, like this one from Emmie West which is waiting on the table to be looked at. Yours will never wait. They will give me a share in all you are enjoying, your snow mountains, and such flowers as I suppose I have no idea of. How I shall revel in your descriptions of them."

"It is time we turned to Emmie's letter. I promised to call her brothers and sister to hear it read. They will be waiting downstairs for our summons."

"Let them wait ten minutes longer till you have written your answer to Zürich. Katherine dear, we shall both sleep better to-night if we know that the decision has been made, and the matter settled irre-

vocably. Our hearts will be fit to break, perhaps, but the thing must be, and I know that to have had a long time of indecision first will make the blow harder to bear when it comes. There, I am going to bring your desk and a candle into the window recess, and when you have written your letter to Miss Campbell, I will run downstairs and beg Harry West to post it before he comes up here with the other three, to hear Emmie's news. Then it will be settled, and I shall kiss Dr. Katherine Moore when I go to bed to-night, feeling more certainty that she will exist for other people as well as for myself some day, than I have been able to feel for the last six months or more."

Christabel retained her gay manner till the letter was written and posted; but it was Katherine who read Emmie's long epistle to the brothers and sisters who came up to hear it half an hour afterwards. By that time Christabel's eyes were in no state for reading, though she listened to every tone of Katherine's voice, storing them in her memory to feed on when the room should be empty of such sounds. The meaning of the words made very little impression on her. It was well that the three younger Wests ranged before Katherine on the skeleton's box, and Harry with his elbows on the window-sill, had minds sufficiently at leisure to appreciate the confidences that Emmie had penned with an express view to this "Air Throne" audience.

"Did you ever think much about caterpillars?" Katherine read. "Did you ever wonder how they feel when they first get out of their chrysalises, and find that they have wings? I believe I can tell you, for I fancy it must be just as I felt on the first morning when I awoke at La Roquette and looked out of the window. It was the colour of the sunshine that surprised me most—that and the stillness. I opened my window and put out my head and said, 'Am I Emmie West? Am I alive, or have I died in the night, and is this a new sort of existence I have come into, where everything is as different from all I have known before as this golden sunshine differs from daylight in Saville Street?' It really was a puzzle just for a minute, and then of course I woke quite up, and

knew that I was *here*. *Here* is Madame de Florimel's little château, so the village people call it—a farm-house on the side of a hill surrounded by hills. Here Madame comes in the summer, when her grand old château down in the valley among the vines and olives and flower-fields is quite too hot for an English person to live in. Madame de Florimel is English—‘one of you others,’ as we are told twenty times a day by the natives of the place; but though she is proud of this herself, and likes to let the little château every winter to an English family for the sake of society, you would not guess her to be English to look at her and hear her speak. She has lived forty-two years at La Roquette, and she was only eighteen when she left England; so you can believe that in spite of all the talk made here about her English ways, we do not recognise her for a countrywoman so unmistakably as her neighbours seem to expect. I begin with Madame de Florimel the first thing after my awakening in the morning at La Roquette, because she really was the very next thing that happened to me after my bath of sunshine. I was only half-way through my dressing when there came a knock at my bedroom door, and I opened it upon—what do you think?—a large clothes-basket full of flowers—pale blue double violets, great yellow and white roses, anemones, narcissus, awfully lovely irises, white and blue. I could only scream with joy and bury my face in the flowers. I did not at first notice a girl who had taken the basket from her head, as I opened the door, and who went on telling me in French that she had come up from the great château with this little greeting from Madame de Florimel, who wished thus to convey her sentiments to the English ladies who had arrived at her *maisonnette* last night. It was well that my toilette was pretty well advanced, for the girl (her name is Madelon Claire) walked straight into my bedroom as soon as I lifted my face from the flowers, and when she had put down her burden on my dressing-table, she did not seem to see any reason why she should not stay to see the end. Fancy dressing in a room with all those distracting flowers under your looking-glass, and a French peasant-girl, in a white cap and gold earrings in her ears, looking on! She was not as shy as I was. She took up and

examined my ribbons and cuffs, and went into such ecstasies over that large ugly cairngorm brooch of old Mrs. Urquhart's, that I think I should have let her carry it away with her, if gratitude to Mrs. Urquhart had not restrained me from parting with the present she seemed to think I should value very highly. Before I was ready to put the brooch into my collar, Madelon had told me nearly all her history. She is not Madame de Florimel's servant, as I supposed at first. She lives in a farm-house in a valley behind our hill, and she had gone to the château quite early that morning to take a *bouquet d'oranges* and some *pommes d'amour* to Madame de Florimel; and madame, knowing that she must pass her *maisonnette* on the way home, permitted her to have the honour of bearing this little offering of flowers to the English ladies. Observe—no one but 'madame' calls the new château a *maisonnette*. Madelon explained carefully to me that she was repeating madame's word, and seemed anxious to impress me with madame's combined magnificence and humility. It was early when Madelon and I left my bedroom, too early for Ward to have begun to think of taking Aunt Rivers her earliest cup of tea, and as I knew I could not be wanted for an hour or so, I accepted Madelon's invitation to walk home with her and be introduced to her mother, 'who,' Madelon said, 'would be ravished with the honour of receiving a first visit from the English young lady. Madame would not grudge her this great pleasure, as she was an invalid whom everyone indulged.' I laughed at the notion of being of so much consequence that it mattered to whom I paid a first visit, and tried to explain what sort of a person Emmie West really was; but Madelon only laughed till her face was all dimples, and, as French phrases in which to disparage myself did not come to hand readily, I gave it up and followed her down a flight of stone steps into the garden. Madelon left me there, to beg a cup of coffee and a piece of bread for me from La Fermière, who lives in the lower rooms of the little château, and I stood and looked about me. There were three or four olive-trees in front of me, and their leaves, with the sun shining on them, looked just as if they were all made of frosted silver; beyond

came a vineyard, red-brown earth with rows of tree-stumps, like dwarfish hill-men struggling to get their arms and heads out of the ground; then a strip of green corn, and then the hill dips down into a deep ravine. All this is madame's property, where we are at home, but I am afraid I shall never make you see what lies further away. Hills behind hills, slopes of olives, dark green pines, bare mountains, pink and lilac and grey, with here and there dazzling white snow-caps towering up into the sky. Before I had half done looking, Madelon called me to take my coffee, and I saw that La Fermière was waiting at the door of her house to give it me herself, and that a whole troop of night-capped children were peeping out from behind her ample skirts, to get sight of me as I drank it.

"'Will you go round by the road or through the *bosquet*?' Madelon asked, and of course I chose the *bosquet*, though I did not tell her that I had never been in anything that calls itself a wood in my life before.

"A little winding path led us through the wood, which I now perceived is only a belt of firs sheltering madame's best vineyard, and then we came out half-way down the hill-side, and I could see what a valley is like. Oh, so sunny, and green, and still, such golden lights on the grass, such clear blue shadows from the olive-trees, such thousands of anemones and violets at one's feet, such blue overhead; and down below at the bottom, a winding pathway and a little river where some women were kneeling washing clothes in the running water. We could hear their voices chattering, and the gurgle of the stream among the big stones where they were pounding their linen.

"Near the foot of the hill we passed under some olive-trees, in one of which stood a young man with a great pruning-hook lopping a branch. He called out to tell Madelon that he had been fishing in the river that morning, and that he had already been to her house to take a little offering of eels to her mother for the *déjeûner*.

"'Does everybody take offerings to everybody?' I asked; and Madelon blushed, and looked shyly up into the tree where the young man stood balancing

himself on a bough; then she seized my hand and made me run quite to the end of the slope before she answered.

“‘But no—it is not the custom of the country to make offerings—except—to madame, or on *fête* days, or at the New Year, or when one returns after an absence; but—in short, what would you have, when a young man lives in the next valley, and meets you at all the *fêtes* and coming home from mass on Sunday? He—naturally wishes to please your mother.’

“By-and-by, Madelon stopped and pointed out a square white house far up on an opposite hill, where she said the young man’s parents, Monsieur and Madame Barbou, live and own all the vineyards and olive grounds that stretch down into another little valley.

“She said it was a better property than her father’s, because the Barbou fields lie on the sunny side of the hill; and that it was better cultivated too, for Monsieur and Madame Barbou were so happy as to have a good son to work for them, whereas, she was only a girl, and her parents are alone but for her. ‘Still, I have courage,’ she added. ‘And now you see our house, mademoiselle; we climb here—to the right, and you will always know your way by that clump of orange-trees—the only ones that grow at this end of the valley.’

“I wish you could have seen her, Katherine, when she said, ‘Still I have courage’—you would have liked the brave look in her brown eyes so much. She is no taller than I am, and she has slender shoulders, and a thin brown face with a nice dimple in each cheek when she laughs; yet I find that she works hard in the fields digging among the vines and olives, and walks miles up to mountain pastures to cut food for her *pauvres bêtes*, as she calls the two mules, and the goat with its kid that belong to the farm and are tethered close to the house. There was a wood-fire with a great pot hanging above it in the room Madelon brought me into, and in a corner of the wide open hearth sat the old mother, spinning with a distaff and spindle. She laughed till she nearly fell into the fire when she found I had never seen anyone spin before, and that I thought it a wonderful thing; and while I watched her, Madelon brought out wine and

raisins and figs of her own drying, and by-and-by slipped away to fetch her father and her uncle, who were at work somewhere among the vines, to come in and look at me, and click their glasses with mine when my health' was drunk, before I went away. I have never been made so much of in my life before, and I feel quite elated and gratified, so you need not be surprised if the orange-tree-house people fill up a good deal of space in my letters.

"There are other beautiful valleys round our château besides this one, but I think I shall continue to love it best. It was the first glimpse I had into Paradise, and Madelon, my first friend, is its Eve. As for the Adam—well—Madelon would go part of the way home with me, and while we were walking by the river, I spied some beautiful fronds of maiden-hair ferns growing on the opposite bank, just where the stream is broadest: while I was exclaiming with vexation that I could not get at them, and Madelon was risking a fall into the water by reaching after them with a crooked stick, '*A votre service,*' said a voice behind us, and the young man with the pruning-hook stepped at one stride from the top of the bank into the middle of the stream. After being instructed by Madelon that it was 'those green leaves, but, yes—nothing else than those small green leaves the English young lady wanted,' he gathered them, and presented them to me most politely. I wanted to divide the ferns with Madelon, when Antoine (that is the knight of the pruning-hook's name), had disappeared among the olive-trees on his own hill, but she did not see it. What did she want with little green leaves of which there were plenty all up the river, and as for M. Antoine—for I could not help saying a little word about his kindness—what would you have? When one meets so often by accident, on week-days among the vines, and coming away from mass on Sundays, one cannot feel exactly as to a stranger. Yet one thinks of one's parents who have perhaps their thoughts, and their pride, and the Barbou lands were, alas! so much richer than other people's; and since M. Barbou had been elected Maire of the Commune there had been a little misunderstanding, or little jealousy. The two houses on the opposite hills were not on such neighbourly terms as had been the case when the children in

them were still children. 'It was sad,' Madelon said, just letting the dimples in her cheeks disappear for a moment, 'but it was so; and one must make up one's mind.'

"Even in Paradise, you see! One need not get among 'countys' and dukes, for opposite houses to have feuds, and Romeo and Juliet stories to spring up.

"I have left very little space in my letter for Madame La Comtesse, which would shock Madelon very much if she knew, yet I assure you, Aunt Rivers and I are getting into a way of discussing her sayings and doings almost as incessantly as the La Roquette people do. What can I tell you about her? She is not the least in the world like Mrs. Kirkman, for one thing, and the court everybody pays her does not exasperate me in the least. I think even you, Katherine, would take the infection of worship if you were here. Luckily for me, Aunt Rivers is terribly afraid of driving down the steep hill, so it falls on me to return all Madame de Florimel's visits, and be the medium of communication between the two châteaux. Madame is very kind to me, and makes as much of me as if I were Lady Rivers's daughter, instead of her niece. So far away from London you see, she does not take in the immense difference that exists between a West and a Rivers, or perhaps it would not be as much to her as to other people if she did understand it. I can't help enjoying myself, though sometimes I think I must be very selfish to feel so happy just because the sun shines and everybody smiles, while things in Saville Street remain the same as ever. The spring creeps on, not by fits and starts as it does in England, but bringing brighter sunshine and fresh flowers every day. Now it is violets and anemones, by-and-by it will be tulips and gladiolus among the corn, and Madelon has shown me a marshy place by the river where there will be flags and daffodils, but I find these are not so common here as I expected from a remark someone made to me before I came. Still the spring creeps on, and I cannot help being very happy.

"Your loving Friend,

"EMMIE WEST.

"P.S.—There is a likeness of Mr. Anstice in one of the morning-rooms at the great château. I recognised it

the moment I got into the room, but I have not said anything yet to Madame de Florimel about our knowing him a little in England. I don't think I ever shall."

"Emmie gives us very little useful information in her letters," observed Mildie discontentedly, when the reading ceased. "She promised to find out for me what kind of frog it is that is eaten in the South of France, and the nature of the Communal Government; but you see, though she actually mentions a maire of the commune, she does not add a single fact that can be called interesting."

"What a sell it is that Emmie should have gone to such a jolly place, instead of Casabianca or me," remarked the Gentle Lamb, reflectively. "Why, I should have been up in the tree with that man she talks of, in half a minute, and I would have followed him into the river, and made him show me where the eels hide, or perhaps turn out a water-rat, and she could do nothing, poor idiot, but stand still and stare. There's no sense in girls travelling, they can do nothing when they get to a place but pick flowers."

"And be happy, even when they leave a sister behind them in Saville Street," said Christabel, coming forward with a brave smile on her face, and leaning over Katherine's chair. "Yes, I am very much obliged to Emmie for telling me that piece of good news to-night. You may take the letter downstairs now, Mildie, and read it to your mother, for dinner must be over by this time and your father settled to his evening nap, but mind you bring it back to me again. I shall keep it to encourage me," she whispered to Katherine, "till I get just such another happy one of my own. Your flowers and sunshine, when I read of them, will be so much mine, that you will never need to pity Saville Street, as far as I am concerned."

CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE CHATEAU GARDENS.

La vie est un voyage,
 Tâchons de l'embellir :
 Jetons sur son passage
 Les roses du plaisir.
 Dans l'âge heureux de la jeunesse
 L'amour nous flatte, il nous caresse,
 Il nous présente le bonheur,
 Puis il s'envole ; on voit l'erreur,
 Hélas que faire ?
 Tâcher de plaire.
 Du bien présent savoir jouir
 Sans trop songer à l'avenir.

"Yes, yes, my child ; but there are two sides to this question, as to every other, and I have lived so long here, and assisted, as was my duty, in arranging so many marriages, that I have come to feel even a little shocked at an English girl's manner of thinking on these subjects. There is a great deal to be said in favour of trusting to the experience and cooler judgment of parents and elders, who understand, as you young people do not, the large part which suitability of *entourage*—I cannot get the English word, I am positively forgetting my English—plays in enabling two people to live comfortably together. If a girl were to tell me she had fallen in love, not that any French girl would dream of so terrible an indiscretion, I should recommend her mother to look after her well, and marry her to the most experienced middle-aged man of their acquaintance who was willing to take the responsibility of her guidance. That would be my idea."

"Poor Madelon," said Emmie West, peeping shyly up from under her large shady hat into the face of Madame de Florimel, at whose side she was pacing the broad terrace of the château garden, flanked on each side by orange-trees. "Poor Madelon, then I am afraid I have done more harm than good by confiding my fancies to you. Please don't think that she herself has ever given me any exact ground for them. But when you opened out your plan to me about the *épiciér* from Grasse, who has asked you to find him a wife in the village, and said you were thinking of Madelon, I could

not help telling you what I had observed since I came here."

"So, so, it is in thy head, is it, little one, that this pretty romance of the olive-trees has grown up. Thou hast thy little ideas on these subjects, then, it seems."

"Yes, I have," said Emmie, taking courage to look back playfully into the keen, kind eyes that were scrutinising her face. "Yes, madame, I have; but please don't advise my mother to marry me to the first prudent old man who would take the trouble of ruling me. I should not like it at all, and poor mamma would be very much puzzled to know how to set about such an enterprise."

"Precisely, that is the English way, and though, as everybody here is well aware, I am English, and even strongly English in all my habits and prejudices, this one custom of the country, the carelessness of mothers, passes my understanding. If you, my child, had belonged to me, see how it would have been between us. From the first hour of your life I should have watched your heart; there would have been no opportunity for an idea to enter that had not been shaped by my experience first: then when the hour arrived for settling your destiny in marriage, there could have been no possibility of a conflict between our wills; you would have had no other thought but to approve my choice. Why has not your mother, who loves you, you say, so dearly, why has not she acted in a similar manner?"

"Poor mamma," cried Emmie; "if you only knew how many more important things she has to think about than my heart! Besides, don't you know, in England we think it right to leave all that. It may never come; and if it does—yes, dear madame, I will say it out, though you are lifting your eyebrows at me—I do think it must be best to choose a little for one's self, and even to love a little of one's own accord, if one is to marry."

Very delicately marked were the eyebrows that surprise, half feigned, half real, lifted up into a white brow, on which a few lines of age and care were written, lightly as with a fine pencil. And the rest of the face corresponded with the delicacy of these lines; a small aquiline nose; firm, thin lips, that looked more accustomed to open for commands than entreaties; a skin,

whose clear fineness had resisted forty-two years of exposure to Southern sunshine, and sixty of life; deep-set grey eyes, with a hint of kindly Northern humour sweetening their habitual keenness; a figure as slim and alert as Emmie's own, which somehow managed quite as remarkably as did the face, to express the combined results of early training and long habit, of English originality and French taste. This combination was particularly visible just now, as Madame de Florimel paused in her walk to look full at Emmie with lifted eyebrows and smiling eyes; her face daintily framed in a becoming French hood, and the skirt of her black silk dress drawn in a careless bunch through her pocket-holes, to set her thickly-soled feet free for the brisk exercise in which she delighted.

"*Ah, voilà,*" she cried merrily, perceiving that her look of pretended surprise was calling fresh and fresh floods of crimson into Emmie's fair face. "We must look a little further into this by-and-by—that little letter of caution to thy mother will have to be written I think—but there precisely at this moment comes Joseph Marie, who can never manage so much as to take the cows out for a walk between the vines, without calling me from talk with my friends. He is beckoning me to come down to the pond to speak with him. I will return soon and finish our discussion."

Emmie followed madame to the end of the terrace, and watched her as she nimbly descended a flight of marble steps that led from the upper garden, where a semblance of effort was maintained to drill the luxuriant vegetation in diamond and heart-shaped beds, to a wilderness below where nature and the advancing spring had taken the matter entirely into their own hands. How lovely the wilderness looked that sunny morning! The borders of prickly-leaved artichokes, between which madame was now picking her way, the strip of green corn flaring with red anemones, the round pond at the bottom of the inclosure where Dr. Urquhart's green frogs were croaking, not in full chorus, indeed, but loud enough to secure that Emmie should never be ignorant of their existence again, the bed of violets that girdled the pond with a belt of vivid colour, and sent out arrowy per-

fumes to where Emmie stood. Scent, warmth, colour, strange dissonant music, vivid intense life in air and earth and sky, all seemed to expand Emmie's being into new perceptions of delight, as she stood imbibing them rather than thinking of them, while in her heart there was a curious reaching forth towards something yet to come; something which seemed only an echo of that call of the spring to which nature was responding so ardently.

When madame had disappeared behind the door of the cow-shed, Emmie turned round and walked back towards the château. Shabby and out of repair as the white stone building really was, it looked a dazzling Aladdin's palace of marble in the strong mid-day sunshine, the very weather-stains and the green lizards that were basking here and there on the hot walls, turning themselves into gems for its embellishment that day. Here, too, even in the seldom-used apartments of the west wing, were signs of activity; windows wide open; gay strips of carpet hanging over the railing of a balcony at the far end of the house, into which two of madame's white-capped handmaidens had dragged some ancient gilded chairs and tapestry sofas, and were proceeding to evoke clouds of dust from them with their brooms. Presently Madelon came through the window on to the balcony to inspect the work, and leaned over to nod and smile at Emmie as she passed below. Madelon, being madame's principal favourite among the village maidens, was generally invited to the château whenever anything unusual was in prospect, and as madame had sent her a summons yesterday on the receipt of a letter from England, she had appeared in the early morning and had since been hovering from attic to cellar, supplementing the exertions of the servants, and welcomed warmly among them, as the sure harbinger of some pleasant interruption to the slow routine of daily life.

Yes, and even beyond the precincts of the château was this breeze of change noted and rejoiced in. By the great iron gates that opened on to the village road, little groups of children kept gathering and scattering, while sometimes an older face looked in between the bars. Now it is old Madame Mül with a great bunch of canes from the river on her head, who stops and nods encourage-

ment and congratulation to the maidens who are dusting that magnificent château furniture, for the astonishment of the guest who is coming from England to-morrow. Now it is M. le Curé himself in his cassock and curled hat, and the village blacksmith with his grimy face and forge apron, who stop to chat and look up at the balcony. Emmie cannot quite catch their words, but she guesses the cheerful nature of the conversation by the winks and nods and snaps of the fingers that accompany the talk.

"Our dear madame is," so the talk runs, "expecting her English relation to make her a little visit again this spring. What a joy for our good madame, who is so English, and who will naturally rejoice to show her relation some of the fine things he cannot see elsewhere, and of which he will no doubt speak a great deal when he gets back to his own miserable country. And precisely by good fortune, never for several years have the vines, and the olive groves, and the flower fields, of madame been looking so well as just now, nor her *bêtes* so flourishing, nor have her wine and oil cellars and her poultry-yard been so well furnished. Ah, ah, there will be someone who will open his eyes wide by-and-by, at the display made before him of so much prosperity and good management; due it must be confessed principally to the good sense and resolution of that brave Joseph Marie, in carrying out his own plans, and resisting madame's English innovations. Yet, since madame is good to everyone, one would not grudge, one would indeed rejoice heartily with her, in the triumph she is expecting."

Having come to this happy conclusion they moved on, and another little group formed, of young girls from the river with piled baskets of white linen on their heads, who were still more enthusiastic in their exclamations of delight at the sight of the old furniture, and the prospect of a guest at the château. The whole place was bubbling over with festivity, and somehow the rejoicing did not seem exaggerated to Emmie, considering who it was that was coming to-morrow, with news from home, (her Saville Street letters had spoken of a visit he had made there lately for the purpose of carrying the last intelligence to her), and

what sort of a look,—joyful or sorrowful,—would be on the speaking face that seemed to answer to her thoughts and interpret them as no other had ever done.

Emmie turned at the end of the terrace and walked back to meet Madame de Florimel, now approaching from the lower garden, and as she buried her face in a bunch of daffodils, she wondered whether a really sensible person, whether Katherine Moore herself in like circumstances, could help feeling as foolishly happy as she felt just then. Madame, who seldom troubled herself to gather flowers, having long since had a surfeit of them, appeared, however, at the top of the marble steps with three or four primroses and a cowslip between her fingers, poor little withered blooms, the only shabby ones in the garden, which she had gathered behind the cow-shed in a shady spot where the roots had been planted long ago. Her eyes were fixed upon them when Emmie joined her, and the expression of her face had a very unusual touch of melancholy.

"See," she said, "how unhappy my English primroses look in the grand company they find themselves among. Wynyard Anstice brought them from the woods at Leigh, the last time he came here with his uncle. But I made a mistake in asking for them; I might have known well enough that living things transplanted from one country to another never come to much good, or are happy."

"Madame—but you, madame," cried Emmie, surprised by her quick sympathy into answering to the thought instead of the words of her companion.

Madame was not at all accustomed to being understood better than she intended, and being talkative by nature, had fallen into a habit of indulging in spoken reveries, which, with Madelon or the good curé by her side, had brought no other inconvenience than that of confirming her companions in their chronic contempt for madame's English ideas. She turned rather sharply to look at Emmie now, but could find nothing to alarm or offend her in the sweet wistfulness with which the girl's reverential eyes were trying to read her face. Had she not lately been saying, that had Providence blessed her with a daughter like this, there should only be one heart and one soul between them, and indeed—

A swift thought darted through madame's inventive brain, so delicious to her that it nearly drove away the sad reflections that had occupied her during her progress up the garden; then, seeing as by a flash of lightning how the two trains of thought, the sad and the joyful, might be made to fit into each other, she grasped after the fleeting melancholy, and said, musingly, as she laid the stalks of her English flowers together in a bouquet:

"Ah, my child, the sight of these flowers has brought my thoughts back to the subject we were discussing when I was called away: the question of how the great event in a girl's life should be conducted. You think it strange in me, so entirely English as I am in all my principles, to have adopted French notions on the subject of forming marriages, but I followed your plan when I was young, my child. I chose for myself, and having given up all other ties for the man whose society I believed enough for my happiness, I have lived a very solitary life in this place for forty years. Yes, it is nearly forty years since I began to spend my time chiefly alone here, with affectionate neighbours and occupations, but alone, as you see."

"M. le Comte died, then, so soon after your marriage?" said Emmie.

"He died at Monaco two years ago, my child, of a sudden seizure at the gaming-table, where he had long been accustomed to spend his nights and days. We had different ideas, different habits, a different faith. I occupied myself with his interests to the last, and I have done my best to save something out of the ruin he made, for my son—to create an existence for him, which he will perhaps appreciate when I am gone."

"Ah, you have your son."

"For two or three years of his childhood I had him, but he was educated apart from me, and in growing up he has removed himself further and further from my influence. He is an ardent Catholic, and his spiritual advisers do not advocate his spending much of his time with an English mother. I have only twice seen his wife and child. I am a lonely old woman, as you see, and when I am not occupied with my *ménage*

and my farming, I fall to speculating on the difference it would have made in my own life, and in some other lives, if I had taken my father's and mother's advice, and accepted the husband they had planned for me."

Emmie's sympathetic eyes asked for more; and madame, laughing, as she lightly struck her cheek with the bouquet she had arranged to her mind by this time, went on:

"Ah, what a lover of love stories we have here. You will not be content, I see, till you have drawn the whole history out of me; and you are wondering how a girl of eighteen—your own age, I think,—came already to have two lovers."

"No," said Emmie, quickly, "for the girl of eighteen was you."

"So an English girl can make a pretty speech, or has she learned it already from Madelon? However, the second suitor in my estimation was no great conquest, and I don't think it ever came into my head to consider him a lover at all. He was my cousin, a certain Wynyard Anstice whom I had known all my life, in my baby days as a big, teasing, over-affectionate schoolboy, and afterwards as a grave young man, who came to our house at regular intervals, and was always more and more intent on matters that did not interest me, and more and more tiresomely determined to thrust himself and them on my notice."

"Was he at all like the relation, the Mr. Wynyard Anstice, who is coming here to-morrow? But no, there cannot be any likeness."

"Why not?" asked madame, raising her eyebrows again. "Relations are alike sometimes. However, you are right in your guess; the present Wynyard Anstice does not get his good looks or his pleasant ways from our side of the house, though he is an Anstice at the bottom, and can even remind me of his uncle when he turns obstinate. My cousin Wynyard was an eldest son, and his father was a rich man, while mine, though the head of the family, was absolutely poor for our station. Titled poverty has been my lot through life, and I have learned to accustom myself to its straits and its unsubstantial dignities, till I doubt

whether I could accommodate myself to anything else. Even then, I had imbibed a certain contempt for my uncle, because he had early in life married the daughter of a wealthy trading family, and allowed his name to be associated with theirs in the business from which their riches were drawn; and when the eldest son showed a real talent for affairs, and threw himself with energy into the pursuits of his mother's family, all his chance of success with me was over for ever. I was a foolish, wilful girl, as I said before, and I had my way; sometimes, in my lonely hours, I amuse myself by figuring the life I might have had if my mother had had hers. It would not have been all roses, any more than this is, but there would have been perhaps greater compensations. I should have lived among old friends, and during the greater part of my middle life in my own childhood's home, for my only brother died soon after my father, and the Leigh estates, such as they were, came to my cousin, who lived in the old house till he died."

"And never married?"

"But not for love of me. Misfortunes follow some people, and my cousin was destined to suffer from a much deeper heart-wound than any I gave him. The winter after my brother's death, he came to La Roquette to pay me a long visit. There were matters of business to discuss between us, and I think he found a certain satisfaction in seeing how things were here, and in bringing his once-despised acuteness to my aid, using it to protect me from some of the worst consequences of the position in which I had placed myself. That year the *maisonnette* on the hill was fitted up, and I invited a dear English friend with her daughter to spend the first winter in it. The daughter was a charming girl, thoroughly English, but of a type I had not seen before, full of little enthusiasms and notions which she would quite forget herself in defending. I was French enough then to be doubtful of my friend's wisdom in having allowed her daughter to run beyond her so far, but my grave elderly cousin was thoroughly bewitched, over head and ears in love, after the second morning of arguing and dawdling together up and down this terrace. I confess I used my

influence with the mother and the young girl, to give matters the turn he wished, feeling that I owed my cousin something. It was one of the few mistakes in that way I have ever made in my life. They were engaged in this garden. Ah me! I can see them coming up the marble steps together, he all radiant, and eager to tell me of his success, and she blushing and smiling at the thought of the pleasure the news would give to her mother and me. But it did not answer. On closer acquaintance she grew alarmed at his imperious temper, that clashed perpetually with her ideas, and soon after they returned to England she jilted him to marry the younger of his two half-brothers, young men who had grown up since I left England, and to whom my elder cousin had acted the part of a father."

"This girl and the young brother were Mr. Wynyard Anstice's father and mother then?"

"You have guessed it. That is his special link with me, and indeed he is the only one of my English relations in the younger generation that I trouble myself to keep up an acquaintance with. I can't help clinging to him, and the attraction seems mutual; for here, after rather a long interval, and without any pressing of mine, he comes proposing to spend a few weeks with me. It will bring a crowd of old recollections to have him here again, with those looks and ways that have so much of his mother in them. An unlucky resemblance, for it has cost him a fortune already. His parents both died in India a few years after their marriage, and left him a legacy to his uncle's care, with, I believe, a great many professions of repentance for their past conduct towards him. The old man behaved very well, and accepted the charge of the child, reluctantly at first, but growing fond of him by degrees, and treating him in all respects like a son. I was glad when I saw what a fine handsome boy the little Wynyard was, not so like his mother as to awaken painful recollections, but with a great deal of her brightness and sweetness of nature.

"For some years it seemed as if my cousin had at last succeeded in binding one living creature to himself; and I hearing of it, and seeing it, for the two paid several visits here together, rejoiced that the doom of utter soli-

tude had not come upon us both, that a little bit of natural cheerfulness and family love had visited my old home once more. It did very well while Wynyard was a boy, for he has a fine temper, and so long as there was only the question of yielding his wishes in every-day matters, his bright good humour made all easy ; but when the time came for him to think for himself, and he developed the same tendency to take up enthusiasms his mother had had, then—well, I understood the conflict that followed, better it may be than anyone else. It was affection, intensified by recollections of past pain, quite as much as a tyrannical temper, that made my poor cousin resent so bitterly the differences of opinion that grew up between himself and his darling when the boy approached manhood. If Wynyard could have agreed with him on every point, and fallen in with all his prejudices, he would have felt himself avenged, so to speak, of the old desertion ; but when the one person he had allowed himself to love in his latter years chose to think and act for himself in a manner directly opposed to his judgment, all his former affection turned to gall, and he seemed to lose even his sense of justice.”

“ Did he die unforgiving ? ” asked Emmie, anxiously.

“ It was a seizure at the last. Wynyard was sent for, and the other nephew, who is now Lord Anstice, and they were both with him for the last week of his life. He recovered consciousness a few hours before the end, and seemed pleased, so Wynyard told me, to see him near, speaking to him as of old, as if there had never been any quarrel. But if he remembered the injustice he had committed, and wished to undo it, it was too late then. Wynyard, at all events, was not one to allow last moments to be disturbed with thoughts of worldly possessions. It had always been supposed that the large fortune my cousin inherited from his father would go to Wynyard, and that the other nephew would have the Anstice estates, which had greatly increased in value under my cousin’s management. When the will came to be read, however, it was found that Wynyard’s name was left out, and that the whole of the property went to the other nephew, an idle young man, who had never been a favourite with his uncle till just at the last, when he took

him up, to punish Wynyard for his independence. Wynyard makes very light of the disappointment, professing to think it only fair that he should be left to abide by the principles he had chosen, and prove that he understood what he was about when he said they were sufficient for him. All that is beyond me—belonging indeed to regions of thought into which I do not profess to have entered—and I suppose I ought to be glad to see my father's title in the way of being properly supported at last; but I don't think I am. I like the old simplicity and the dignity that owed nothing to wealth, and I can't escape feeling as if the injustice done to Wynyard may be traced back to influence I exercised here, in walks up and down this terrace long ago. If I had not planned a little too eagerly just that once in my life, matters might have adjusted themselves more smoothly. The two young people who married afterwards would have met and liked each other all the same, doubtless, but there would have been no previous promise to make their love a treachery to the elder brother,—or they would never have met, and my cousin would have divided his possessions justly among his heirs, uninfluenced by old loves and grudges. But forgive me, my child, I have been talking to myself instead of to you for the last ten minutes. It is a bad habit I have fallen into through living so much alone. Excuse me."

Emmie's face did not suggest the need of any apology, but Madame de Florimel was no longer looking at it; her eyes had for some time been fixed on a distant part of the garden, as if she had been calling up recollections of vanished figures to people it with.

"I live so much alone," she continued, "that when I am walking up and down here, I fall into a way of following out my own thoughts. It is among the old days that I live, instead of in the present, fancying how this and that might have been, if one or the other person had acted differently, or if circumstances had occurred otherwise than they did. Ah, well; but now you see, my child, our argument is ended. I have told you a chapter out of my own history, all *à propos* of Madelon's prospects, to convince you that you had better leave her parents and myself to settle her marriage. If my friend.

the Grasse *épicier*, whom I have long known, and with whose affairs I am well acquainted, should approve himself to us elders, you young ones will do well to acquiesce in our decision. It is a tangled web, my child, this life that we are all in, and it needs experienced hands to lay thread and thread together. Ah, here comes Madelon to tell us that the *charette* is waiting to take you back to the *maisonnette*. You have made this morning of waiting pass pleasantly, my child, and you must not forget to express my gratitude to your good aunt for sparing you to me. It is an amiable person, this Lady Rivers, though somehow or other I—but what am I about, maundering to myself again? I must have entered my dotage to-day. Let us go and see if Madelon has remembered to put the flowers I gathered for your aunt under the *charette* seat.”

CHAPTER XX.

RED ANEMONES.

Lo! in the middle of the wood,
The folded leaf is wooed from out the bud.

THE bright sunshiny mornings did not always bring Emmie West such long leisure as she had enjoyed in the château garden when Madame de Florimel had confided to her a chapter of her early history. Even to the pretty *maisonnette* on the side of the hill, there would come every now and then dark days, and there was sure to be one hour in each day, when Emmie was tempted to wish herself back in dingy Saville Street, finding that uninterrupted sunshine out of doors did not quite make up for gloom inside the house. Entire days of discomfort occurred whenever a badly-cooked dinner, or a suspicion that Madame la Comtesse had singled out Emmie for attentions due to someone else, aggravated Lady Rivers into a state of temper that refused rest to herself or anyone under her control. The hour of trial that came with each day was caused by Lady Rivers's impatience to get her letters, and was spent in weary watching for the approach of the

facteur down the steep road that connected La Roquette with the little mountain town which was its nearest point of contact with a world concerning itself with letters.

The eagerness of the present inhabitants of the little château to have their share of news at a particular hour of the day was an ever-recurring surprise and scandal to the cheery old *facteur*. He was accustomed to place the weekly newspaper, or the rare letter he brought to the scattered farm-houses he visited in his rounds, on the topmost door-step, or on the wooden ledge where the *marmites* dried themselves under the kitchen window, and to leave them there to greet the eyes of their owners when they returned in the evening from their day's work among their olives and vines. He did not know how to shrug his shoulders high enough in contempt of people who wasted good daylight in watching on their door-step for his arrival, as Emmie West watched every day. Though he was too true a Frenchman not to have a smile and a polite word of excuse ready when the eyes that watched and reproached him for his delays were as pretty as Emmie's, he could not reconcile himself to having his right to take his *déjeuner* leisurely by the road-side so questioned.

To people who passed the entire day in doing nothing, what could it matter at what hour they had their letters? Madame la Comtesse was more reasonable, and far from requiring her budget at a particular time of the day, allowed him to spare himself the long descent into her valley, and to leave her letters at the *maisonnette* to be carried down the hill by one of the farm people at their leisure. Why should anyone be more particular than madame, and, above all, what could one want with so many letters every day? Two, four, half-a-dozen.

The *facteur* could not restrain a glance of curiosity darting from his dark southern eyes, as he counted these numbers, day after day, into Emmie's hand. A little joke about a "*bien-aimé*" hovered on his lips, which never, however, got itself said, for Emmie, though accessible enough at other times, always looked grave when she was taking in the letters.

Who could say what aggravations to temper for Aunt Rivers might not be folded up in one or another of them?

She generally remained for a moment on the steps outside, shading her eyes with her hand, and looking after the *facteur* till he had passed the hedge of roses now full of pink blooms, at the bottom of the garden, just to refresh herself with as much sunshine as possible, before turning back to the house to confront Lady Rivers with a handful of fateful letters.

Madame's valley, with all its scattered dwellings, lies spread out like a panorama at her feet. The groups of houses she spies from her high station, here, by a red roof in a bosquet of grey olives, there, by a thin column of smoke rising through the thick, high canes that border the river; these all contain friends, and have associations for Emmie now. She knows who owns that group of fig-trees, whose branches hold up buds like delicate green cups, high in the air; whose is the orchard of quince and almond at the opening of the valley; and to whom belongs the vineyard on the other side of the winding road, where the dwarf vines have clothed themselves promisingly with downy leaves, and clusters with a good smell. Ah, the winter is over and done indeed; "the fig-tree puts forth her leaves, the vines have a good smell;" and Emmie's heart to-day adds softly to the ancient spring-tide love song—"and he has come."

Down there in the great white house all bathed in sunshine, he opened his eyes this morning on all this beauty, and perhaps to-day——

But what is Emmie doing, keeping Lady Rivers waiting so long for her six letters? The glow fades from her face as she turns to enter the hushed, shaded house, where as much as possible of the freshness and brightness is shut out to suit the invalid's fancies; bent, Emmie sometimes thinks, on depriving herself of the advantages they have come so far to seek, and on bringing as much of the excitement of her London life about her, as she can lay hold of under the circumstances. Emmie puts it down to the worry of expecting and reading these daily letters, that her aunt's cheek has not lost its hectic flush, and that her nightly sleep-

lessness and morning cough have scarcely at all abated. She even took it on herself to suggest to Alma that the letters from Eccleston Square had better for the future be written more carefully, but the caution did not avail. Lady Rivers fretted so much more at not receiving full descriptions of all the Kirkman parties, that the old practice of giving full details had to be resumed; and Emmie again spent the greater part of the fresh sunny mornings in reading aloud accounts of London gaieties which Alma dutifully despatched day by day for her mother's consolation during her exile from all such delights. These narrations, to Emmie's ears, sounded pleasant enough, and seemed to set forth a very prosperous state of things. She never got quite to understand what were the jarring notes, or why certain names and sentences should bring a quick gasp in her aunt's breathing, and that frightened, baffled look in her eyes, so painful to see.

"Lawrence! Are you quite sure the name is Lawrence? You read so carelessly, Emmie, my dear. It could not possibly be young Lawrence with whom Constance went to the Opera while Sir John was laid up with a sore throat. Look again. Ah, yes, as you say, Alma was there too, but then Alma must have given up her engagement for the Kirkmans' great dinner on Horace's birthday—given it up, too, at the last moment. How could Constance be so wilful? What are they all thinking of? There would be two places vacant at the Kirkmans' dinner-table! Sir Francis would not dine there without Alma; he would not sacrifice himself so far as that. I know him. It's a selfish world, Emmie, my dear, and we poor mothers who are ready to do anything, *anything* for our children's good, must see the plans we have toiled ourselves to death to carry out, defeated by other people's folly and selfishness. There, you had better go away and open your own letter. You have been peeping under the envelope all the time I have been talking. Nobody ever does seem to see my anxieties, or care for what I suffer." Then a great tear would gather in the faded, fevered eyes, and falling, blot out young Lawrence's obnoxious name on Alma's sheet.

It certainly did appear hard to Lady Rivers to find that old enemy of hers, whom she believed she had so thoroughly routed and crushed long ago, starting up in her path again with power to put obstacles in the way of her present projects, even if still sorer heartburnings and terrors in the future need not be foreboded from his reappearance on the scene. More frequently, however, it was the omission of a name in Alma's letters that troubled her.

"Is that all, Emmie?" she would ask. "Are you sure? Let us look through the crossing again. Another long letter without a word of Horace Kirkman in it! Of course when a girl like Alma is engaged, one does not expect her to dwell much upon her feelings and—that sort of thing; but I should like to know at least how often he calls, she might tell me *so much*, I think, and whether she is pleased with the presents he brings her. Let me recollect—yes—it is a long time, more than a week, since Alma mentioned Horace in her letter, and then she spoke almost, I thought, as if she had been annoyed with him for sending her such an expensive valentine. You would not think it a serious fault in a lover—the not knowing how to make you handsome enough presents, would you, Emmie? You would be grateful for such an elegant valentine as Alma found fault with, now would you not?"

"I don't know," answered Emmie, reluctant to contradict, yet unable to rest under the imputation of admiring Mr. Horace Kirkman's style of courtship. "If I liked a person *very* much, I suppose I should not mind his giving me useless things that cost a great deal of money, however silly I might think it."

"Ah, well," said Lady Rivers, coldly, "you are not likely to be tried in that way, my dear. Your lover, if ever you have one, will probably not have money to spend on useless presents, so it is quite as well that you should not acquire a taste for them. You may read me any part of your mother's letter that is interesting enough to take my thoughts from my own troubles. I know she is grateful to me for all my goodness to you and to Aubrey, and it soothes me to hear what she says about how badly you would both have been situated but for me."

Then Emmie glanced breathlessly down the pages of her letter for one of those meek sentences about "My obligations to dear Aunt Rivers for giving you such a happy winter," with which Mrs. West did not fail to sprinkle her epistles, or for some harmless home incident that could be read out without revealing the family straits too plainly. For Emmie was inconsistent enough to resent that little taunt about the probable poverty of her future lover, and even to feel it keenly, though she did hate the Kirkmans so much, and though her dear Countess had imbued her with a greater contempt than ever for vulgar wealth. She was seldom, however, allowed to read far without interruption.

"Dr. Urquhart has given Mildie tickets for some lectures on Physics, and Mrs. Urquhart has promised to take her to the first lecture in the doctor's brougham," she began.

"Physic! what a disagreeable subject for a lecture," Lady Rivers struck in, "if Mildie had to take as much as I, she would not care to hear it lectured about. However, I am glad the Urquharts pay so much attention to Mildie, it looks well." Emmie, finding that her cheeks were tingling under her aunt's meaning smile, dashed headlong into another subject.

"Mamma took her watch the other day to—to—— Oh, that is not interesting."

"Go on, my dear, it interests me. Your mother wears the old watch still that she had when she married; mine was worn out ages ago, but I observe I never get such good things as other people. Your mother's watch wanted mending then, at last?"

"It was not that, exactly," hesitated Emmie. "She took her watch to an old watchmaker, a friend of the Moores, and she says he was very kind and liberal to her about it,—but here is something much better worth reading down here, about the Moores. Christabel is not going to Zürich at Easter after all—Katherine finds she cannot get lodgings, so Christabel is to remain in Saville Street all the summer. Mamma is very glad, and so is Mildie, though they don't appear to see much of Christabel now. She is out a great deal, and has made many new friends. Old David Macvie, the watchmaker, complained of this

to mamma, and was quite in low spirits because she so seldom has time to visit him."

"An old watchmaker! Why should anyone visit him? I don't think I care to hear any more, my dear. You may open a crack of the jalousies now. I think I could bear a little more light, and that I might look at the illustrated paper dear Mrs. Kirkman has sent me again this week without hurting my head. Perhaps I shall find an account of their dinner-party on Horace's birthday. It will amuse me very well to look at that, and you may send Ward with my afternoon tea and go out for a little while, if you like."

The permission was always joyfully received, but never, perhaps, quite so eagerly as on the afternoon of the last recorded conversation, just two days after Emmie's visit to the château garden. She lingered after her dismissal only long enough to summon Ward to her duties, and snatch her own shady hat from its peg in the hall. Then she ran down the steep steps into the flower-garden, and drew a deep breath to blow away any lingering flavour of Kirkman entertainments, or depressing views of human nature that might hang about her, contradicting the sunny beauty of the outside world into which she had emerged, and the joyous hope in her heart that responded to it.

Hush, hush! She paused in tying her hat-strings, and then ran swiftly down the steep garden path between rows of sweetly-smelling beans, till she reached the point where the hill dipped steeply towards the ravine, and there she stood still to listen again. The cicadas and the green frogs were making a little less noise than usual. Above their harsh voices, and above the tinkle of the distant rivulet, Emmie distinguished three clear liquid notes coming from an almond-tree halfway down the near side of the hill. Ah, and now three other notes, liquid sweet, answer from beyond the river. Again the call, and the loving, sweet reply.

Emmie had never heard a nightingale's voice in her life, and had hitherto looked on nightingales as a half mythical kind of bird known chiefly to poets; but she does not doubt their identity to-day, for Madelon had told her that nightingales would sing all day and all

night in the valley when spring had really come, and had not spring come completely since yesterday? She smiled to think how many quotations would have risen to Mildie's lips on such an occasion, while she herself could not recall one good enough. "Most musical, most melancholy." Oh no, no! not melancholy at all. English nightingales might be melancholy singing at night in solemn cathedral closes; but that one in the almond-tree on the hill, singing in the hot, hot sunshine, with a cloudless sky overhead and countless flowers below, was so happy, and had so much to say to his love in the orange grove on the opposite slope, that he did not know how to hurry out his notes fast enough. Emmie would not disturb the sweet talk by walking through the coppice, so she turned up the hill, and determined to take another and longer route to the orange-tree house where she had promised Madelon to call that afternoon.

The open road winding on the ridge of the hill has advantages which Emmie has learned to appreciate by this time. As she climbs, she stops to rest every now and then, and looking backward, sees a wide view spread out at her feet, so that no doings in the distant village could escape her. If Joseph Marie, for example, had brought the *charette* round to the principal door of the château, Emmie would have seen it dwarfed to the size of a toy chariot, with mice for horses, and Joseph Marie no bigger than a frog for a charioteer. But no, there is nothing unusual going on at the château. The diminished courtyard and gardens lie open in their usual sleepy afternoon stillness to the glaring sunshine; not a figure stirring, the jalousies all closed, and the straight avenues between the orange-trees and the magnolias quite empty. There is nothing to be seen in the village street either, but a few women with their water-jugs or their linen-baskets on their heads. Farther away, however, Emmie descries a strange vehicle emerging from the lower entrance to Madelon's valley; yes, a strange vehicle—not madame's *charette*, or any *charette* belonging to the village. Can it be that the threatened grocer from Grasse has already been paying a visit to the orange-tree house in this formal style?

Emmie's curiosity was sufficiently aroused to induce

her to quicken her pace. By the time she reached the path leading down into Madelon's valley, she had lost sight of the village and gained a yet wider horizon. More and more valleys, more and more olive-crowned hills; further and further away patches of parti-coloured fields, showing like fairy gardens in the golden afternoon light; and furthest of all, between the opening heights on the far horizon, another blue,—deeper, more dazzling than the blue overhead,—a moving, living radiance, the blue of the Mediterranean melting and losing itself in the trembling sky-line.

It was almost a rest to turn into the green darkness of the pine-wood after looking at so much light, and Emmie made her way quickly to the head of the valley, where a tiny mountain rivulet burst from the rocky hill-side and began its course through the ravine. A flock of sheep and goats, conducted by a young shepherdess, followed her down the steep; and for years afterwards, whenever Emmie thought of La Roquette, it was that particular scene and its accompanying sounds and sensations that came vividly back to her. The tinkling of the sheep bells; the gurgle of the rivulet through ferns and mosses that choked its shallow bed; the little shepherdess's shrill voice calling her dog; deep evening stillness but for these sounds, and a sense of solitude greater even than had been felt on the lonely road with its wide views. Here there was only the dark vista of the pine-wood she had passed through, the sheltering hill-sides all around her, the depths of shadowy verdure at her feet, and, above all, a glowing line of crimson light where the height from whence she had descended caught the rays of the setting sun.

Her heart echoed back the peace, the joyful calm, with which the little valley, from its crowning crimson height to its cool emerald depths, overflowed. All within her was in harmony with the outside serenity then. Then, but never again completely in all her future life; for, in looking back, she counted that evening as the last of her unconscious girlish days, the point after which she began to have a stake of her own—a private life or death stake in existence. "When I was a girl," always afterwards meant for Emmie West the years lying behind that

evening's walk through the valley. She was, however, quite innocent of any grave reflections at the time, and had not the least idea when she turned her back on the pine-wood, and took the narrow foot-path by the river, that she was walking into her womanhood, and leaving something behind her there, to which she would look back regretfully as long as she lived.

She was thinking of Madelon as she hastened on, wondering what o'clock it was, and whether she should be so fortunate as to meet her at her washing-shed, and be spared the long delays which a formal call at the orange-tree house always involved.

The washing-shed consisted of a few stakes driven into the river bank, and overlaid with trailing vines and gourds, which someone (Madelon never particularised further) had put up and adorned for her special accommodation last summer. It had looked like a mere heap of stakes in the early spring, but now a few downy vine leaves and gourd-shoots were opening themselves out to show the kind of trellis-work that would roof it by-and-by, and in this recess, according to her wishes, Emmie came upon Madelon.

For once in her life, she was not at work, but standing with her hands in her apron, looking up at the budding branches over her head. Emmie called her, and her face relaxed into smiles and dimples, when she saw who was near.

"Ah, Mademoiselle Emmé, how I have wanted you," and then came greeting kisses on each cheek, and an eager acceptance on Madelon's part of Emmie's proposal, that they should finish the walk to the little château through the coppice together.

"I have so wished to see mademoiselle," Madelon repeated several times, glancing with quite unwonted shyness into Emmie's face as they walked along the river path together.

"But you saw me the day before yesterday, Madelon."

"Ah, yes, mademoiselle, but it already seems long ago; things happen of which, perhaps, I ought not to speak; but mademoiselle is so kind, and she has besides a look in her eyes that will draw the words from my lips, I know, before we have been long together."

"Then you may as well begin to tell me at once, Madelon."

Instead of beginning, Madelon looked cautiously round; they were surely quite alone and safe from listeners in this secluded part of the valley, Emmie urged. No, not so utterly alone it seemed; sounds of someone at work high up among the olives on the opposite slope of the hill, might be heard if one listened, as Madelon had evidently been listening a minute or two ago—the ring of an axe, and a strong man's voice singing at intervals.

"It is Antoine," said Madelon, "at work always, late as it is, mademoiselle sees. There is no young man in the neighbourhood who has more courage for work, or is a better son; but what avails it all, if people quarrel and misunderstand each other? Ah, mademoiselle, I speak because my heart is full. Let us climb by this path towards the little château, and when we are in the *bosquet*, I shall be able to tell mademoiselle a little of what I am feeling."

"Yes," Madelon began, when the shelter of the wood was gained, and there was no voice any longer to be heard but the nightingale's singing very loud and clear from a fig-tree: "Yes, I am very unhappy to-day. Madame la Comtesse is so kind to me, you see, so kind, even concerning herself like a mother to plan a future for me, and yet, alas! I cannot be as grateful to her as I ought."

And then, as they slowly threaded the tangled path in the ever-deepening gloom, Emmie found herself listening to the first love-story that had ever been told her at first hand.

The great stress of the trouble so far as Madelon's words showed it at first, lay in the fact that madame's kindness should be in the way of being so unworthily appreciated by one who owed her so much gratitude; but Emmie, who could not feel greatly moved on this account, began to see something else behind all these words, as the talk went on, and Madelon, twisting her apron-strings round and round her fingers as shyly as an English girl, fell into digressions and reminiscences that had less and less to do with madame's share of the

grievance. That story of the fierce dog that used to guard the oil-mill on the way to the school-house, which Madelon had never dared to pass, all through her school-days, without Antoine's holding her hand; the *fête* day when they had walked in procession together; incidents of other memorable *fête* days—down to that late one when, under the chestnut-trees, in the village *place*, Antoine had even talked of speaking soon to his father and mother, urging that though they were both so young, something should be settled lest other plans should be thought of by the elders for either of them.

"And now," Madelon concluded, "to think that the danger which seemed distant then should have arrived, and that madame herself should have brought it about! Madame, whose preference has been my pride and Antoine's boast all our lives—Ah," Madelon choked herself with a great sob as she tried to draw back into her first entrenchments—"Ah, it is terrible to feel so little gratitude towards madame, when she has, as my mother points out, given me a crowning proof of her good opinion; going so far as even to choose a husband for me. It is my inability to feel rightly towards madame that weighs upon my conscience—it is that truly."

"But does not your mother know about Antoine?" asked Emmie. "Cannot she help you?"

"Three months ago," answered Madelon, sorrowfully, "my mother was favourable, and also his mother; or you will easily believe, mademoiselle, that those little words under the chestnut-trees would not have been spoken; but there has since been that *maudite* quarrel between our fathers all about nothing, and my mother resents the hard words that have been spoken. She has her pride, and why should she not? She does not choose that our family should be treated with disrespect by neighbours a little while ago no richer or more thought of than ourselves, and—at such a moment—ah, mademoiselle, to think of M. Bouchillon coming to ask me of my parents, in a *charette* handsomer even than the one in which madame drives to the English church, and also that he has brought a present of a Paris clock to my mother; and it was only last Sunday afternoon, after vespers, that

he made my acquaintance. My poor Antoine! What chance is there for him against a man of such solid pretensions as that? He does not know what has happened yet, or he would not have been singing over his work on the hill as mademoiselle heard just now. But what can he think, what can he hope, when he hears?"

"He will be very unhappy?"

"*Il m'aime*," said Madelon, simply.

"And you, Madelon?" asked Emmie. She knew well enough already; but some demon of sympathetic curiosity impelled her to try to get a nearer view of this half-unknown, half-strangely familiar thing of which they were talking.

Madelon put her much-tortured apron up to her eyes.

"Mademoiselle must pray for me," she faltered, "that my heart may be brought to respond with suitable gratitude to the wishes of madame and my parents."

"But for yourself, Madelon; have you no doubts about your own wishes? M. Bouchillon and his solid pretensions don't tempt you at all?"

"But no, mademoiselle—when one loves, when one has loved from one's childhood—you understand, mademoiselle."

"Yes," said Emmie softly. "It is beautiful I think to love so. I will pray for you, Madelon, but I shall pray that your parents, and madame too, may come to think as you do about this, and that you may be happy with the one who has loved you all your life. I would not give him up, I think, if I were you—no, I am sure I would not."

"Ah, mademoiselle is English," said Madelon, shaking her head—but her hand stole out from under her apron and clasped Emmie's, and the two girls walked on together to the end of the wood, holding hands in a silent sympathy which each felt could not be made more perfect by further explanations, though before many minutes were over their thoughts had sundered, and each was following out her own dream in a very different track.

"If Alma had been true-hearted, like this French girl," Emmie was thinking, "how happy her life might have been. What a beautiful love she would have had."

The gate at the end of the wood opened close to the brow of the hill, and as they approached, it looked like a gate of ebony standing out against the sky where the after-glow was burning still. For a moment Emmie's eyes were dazzled. The change from the wood to the open hill-top was like a coming out from night into daylight again, but as soon as she recovered her sight she perceived a figure leaning over the garden railings among the rose-trees, and her heart gave a great foolish bound, just as if she had not been thinking of *that person* all the time she had been in the wood, and had not hoped through every minute of her long walk that *he* would be there when she came back. The perverse, self-teasing spirit that had sent her so far away on that particular afternoon had been exorcised by Madelon's talk—and she knew, and now confessed to herself, what a bitter, bitter disappointment it would have been if he had not waited till she came back.

Wynyard caught sight of her just as she reached the gate, and leaping the rose-hedge, met her as she came through. His face looked quite radiant with the glow of the sunset, and the pleasant consciousness that he was the bearer of welcome news, and half unconsciously he held out both hands and took Emmie's hands, flowers and all, into their grasp.

"Did I not tell you," he cried, "that we should meet on a hill-side, when you would be more at home here than I? But how is it that you did not expect me? Had you forgotten that I was to come to-day, with my pockets full of letters and parcels from Saville Street, or have you become indifferent to letters, like the rest of the people here? But for these red anemones in your hands, which betray your English love of gathering, I should say you looked naturalized already—as if you were part of the place."

If he meant to say, part of the glowing sunset, part of the rich, sweet beauty of the hill-top, and of the golden evening, Emmie's looks would not have contradicted his thought; and though the enigmatical words conveyed nothing to her ear, she could not miss the look of half-surprised playful admiration that went with them. He had always hitherto seen her grave or embarrassed, a

little ashamed of her dress, a little puzzled or troubled about one thing or another.

This ardent, blushing, happy face, lifted up towards him, radiant with health and welcome, and reflecting harmonious surroundings only, was quite a new revelation.

"I hoped you would come. I knew you would have a great deal to tell me about Saville Street," Emmie said. "And of course I want to hear."

He turned with her, and they had reached the rose-fence before Emmie recollected that she had not said good-bye to Madelon; that they had not spoken since those bold words of encouragement to constancy had passed between them in the wood, and she did not like to part without a farewell. Madelon would think it cold-hearted.

"One minute," she said to Wynyard, "wait one minute; I will be back before you have time to unfasten that little gate among the beans through which we must go into the garden, for I have too much respect for madame's roses to jump over them as you did just now."

Madelon was still standing at the entrance of the wood, and there was a very meaning look on her face when she raised it for Emmie's good-night salutation.

"Ah, but mademoiselle is very happy!" she whispered a little grudgingly. "Everything settles itself so well for *her* future, as one can see. The relation of madame, who comes to her with a message from her mother, and one so handsome, so noble-looking. Ah, mademoiselle, why did you not then tell me a little?"

"No, no, Madelon, you are mistaken—you must not think *that*, indeed."

"But, yes, mademoiselle; when a young man like that comes to one from one's mother, there cannot be a mistake; there is only one thing to think. But I will be silent till mademoiselle gives me permission to speak. I will merely comfort myself now and then by thinking of the happiness that is coming to madame, and to the whole village, when we are allowed to share her satisfaction in such a beautiful arrangement."

There was no use in arguing the point with Madelon, even if Emmie had had breath to argue such a matter. She turned away and walked to the little gate among the beans very slowly, though Wynyard was waiting for her

there. She wanted to still the pulses that throbbed in her ears above the nightingale's song, and to bring her trembling lips into order before she asked for those Saville Street letters, but she did not say to herself that it was longing for news of home that agitated her. Emmie had believed such excuses hitherto, but she knew now that she should never be able to delude herself again with her old devices. Something in Madelon's talk, or in her own thoughts since—or was it the nightingale's songs, or the breath of the sweet evening?—had brought strange revelations and stirrings of heart: something, at all events, had torn the veil away that had hidden the secret so long. She might have to hide it from everyone's knowledge, down in the darkest corner of her heart for all her life long; she determined so to hide it carefully; but the knowledge would always be there. She would never be able to deny again the understanding of her own feelings that had come to her at the entrance of the pine-wood that evening.

CHAPTER XXI.

MADAME'S FÊTE.

Yet would the village praise my wondrous power,
And dance, forgetful of the noontide hour.
Alike all ages. Dames of ancient days
Have led their children through the mirthful maze,
And the gay grandsire, skilled in gestic lore,
Has frisked beneath the burden of threescore.

"WHAT a difference it makes in one's intimacy with a person, to have known him in two places! One has so many people and things to talk about when one meets in a fresh place, that it is impossible to keep up reserve or shyness. Did you ever happen to notice this, dear mamma," Emmie wrote to her mother some three weeks after the events of the last chapter, "or have you wondered at all, why there has been so much about Mr. Wynyard Anstice in my letters lately? I like to tell you everything just as it happens, you know; and as Madame de Florimel is always sending for me to go down to the château, or coming up with Mr. Anstice to spend a long day in walking about her

property on this hill, I am a great deal with them, and they naturally come into all my letters. Aunt Rivers seems to feel as I do about being more intimate with people when one meets them in strange places. I used to think she disliked Mr. Anstice and tried to keep him away from her house in London, but here she is very much pleased when he calls to see her, and likes to talk over Frank's and Melville's prospects, and to recall anecdotes of their school-days. Mr. Anstice is very kind in humouring her, but between ourselves I don't think he likes her any better than he used to do. I am afraid he pays her this attention only because he thinks her really very ill and is sorry for her. He asked me yesterday if I thought Uncle Rivers understood how very little good she has gained by coming here. I felt ashamed of myself, for I fear I have not been watching the state of Aunt Rivers's health lately as exactly as I should do. Ward says it is all her own fault that she does not get well, and I am puzzled, because it does seem as if temper had a good deal to do with it. Whenever I hint at asking Uncle Rivers to come and see how we are getting on, my aunt is very angry, and absolutely forbids my writing. She cannot bear the thought of my uncle and Alma leaving London till the end of the season, and she has planned to make a little tour in the mountains with Madame de Florimel and Mr. Anstice when the heat is too great for us to remain here. I wonder whether this will be really good for her, and whether I ought to oppose the scheme, in spite of its sounding very delightful, as I confess it does, when we all talk about it together?"

Emmie, who had been scribbling as fast as her fingers could move, here laid down her pen, intending to take a furtive look at her aunt, who was also occupied with her home letter, and then to make up her mind as to whether the scruple expressed in the last sentence need be attended to. She looked down, however, more quickly than she had looked up, for to her surprise Lady Rivers had also suspended her pen, and was gazing considerably at her. Lady Rivers was in the middle of a letter to Alma. What could she have found to say to Alma about her? Emmie's conscience

was clear of any offence beyond a little pre-occupation of late, but there was something so unusual, so sinister in the look, that her cheeks went on tingling under its influence all the time she was finishing her letter. Her blushes would have burned even more fiercely if she had been clairvoyante, and could have read the sentence Lady Rivers had just indited, and which she carefully covered with a piece of blotting-paper while she leaned back in her chair to rest and cough, and take the soothing drops she required now after every little exertion. It was a sentence that had cost her a good deal of consideration and planning, and it gave her some anxiety still, as she sat back in her chair thinking it over: "Emmie West and your old friend, Wynyard Anstice, have set up quite a marked flirtation since he turned up so unexpectedly here. I always told you that he was a flirt, and very easily won, but I think this last fancy of his will turn out to be the right thing for him, and that he is in earnest *this time*. Emmie will make a capital poor man's wife, and she has too little knowledge of the world or of society, poor child, to be harmed or annoyed by his eccentricities."

"What effect would these words have on Alma?" Lady Rivers questioned with herself. "Surely they would cure her of any little hesitation, any temptation to regret the past, which must be causing that unsatisfactory behaviour on which even Sir Francis had been remarking lately. Alma's pride would certainly be too deeply stung to allow her to drive her present lover from her when the old one had already consoled himself. The news would be felt as a humiliation; but it would bring her to her senses, and perhaps her discontent with the brilliant lot Providence had assigned to her, deserved the slight punishment of seeing her little cousin carry off the man she would have chosen if she had been allowed her own insane way. One could not—no, even Alma ought not to expect to have everything just as she would like it in this world. She could not reasonably expect a large fortune, and—everything." Here Lady Rivers, in spite of the reasonableness on which she prided herself, heaved a fretful sigh; for, strange to say, at that moment the word "everything"

represented in her mind Wynyard Anstice, weighed against Horace Kirkman as a husband and son-in-law. Wynyard's pleasant manners, his gentlemanly good looks, the sympathy with which he had lately listened to her complaints about Melville's difficulties in Canada and Gerald's college career, and words dropped by him, which, even to her perceptions, revealed a higher standard of right and wrong, and stricter views of what was due from himself to other people, than quite everybody held. These and other qualifications were summed up in Lady Rivers's mind by the word "everything;" and while she told herself that they were, to be sure, mere *bagatelles*, that one could not reasonably expect to be thrown in along with that other grave requirement, she yet sighed. They were characteristics that made life very pleasant when one's near relations had them; one was even perhaps disposed to value them unduly in times of illness like this, when the conviction would force itself that one must die sooner or later, and that one's children, however well married, could but come to die too in the end, and might, if unpleasant stories were true, be disposed in the other world to reproach the parents who had neglected *that* side of the question in their views for them in this.

These, however, were not reflections to be indulged in, after one had taken one's drops. The Kirkmans went to church nearly as often as other people, if they did not entertain high-flown views about duty and unselfishness. Why should one make comparisons? It was quite time that Alma made up her mind, and the little hint, just penned, if even it ran before the fact somewhat, was wholesome for her, and might put an end to the suspense that was wearing one's life out, and effectually preventing one from getting well.

"Emmie, my dear," Lady Rivers said, rousing herself from her reverie, as the sound of approaching carriage-wheels was heard through the open window, "I don't think I will see Mr. Anstice when he comes in. Neither he nor you ever take afternoon tea, I know, so I think I will go away and take mine in my room, and you can go down to the château to see the *fête* as soon as ever you like."

Emmie did not remonstrate or offer to give up the *fête* at the château, to stay with her aunt, for she had discovered that obedience to all Lady Rivers's whims was not only the best policy, but the truest kindness. This new whim of sending her away for whole afternoons, whenever there was anything pleasant going on at the château, was too agreeable to be quarrelled with. Indeed, except when writing to her mother, Emmie had had no time lately to take account of how the days passed. Each one had brought some fresh pleasure that filled her thoughts too full for backwards or forwards looking, and concentrated all her powers on just living in the outward and inward sunshine that had come to her. Even shyness and self-consciousness had for the time released her from their disabling spells. Wynyard's comings and goings no longer agitated her, for she had reached that dangerous, deceptive state of intimacy, when the atmosphere of the person with whom the mind is occupied is as much felt in absence as in presence. She even congratulated herself that she could look forward to the end of this pleasant intercourse with scarcely any regret. There would always be the golden time to remember, and she believed that it would be as good to her after a year's interval as after an hour's.

The *charette* stopped before the house as Aunt Rivers closed the sitting-room door behind her, and Emmie turned from her unfinished letter to the long mirror between the windows, just to get a furtive glance at herself before anyone came in, in order to ascertain that she was in good looks for the *fête* at the château that was to celebrate Madame de Florimel's birthday. She had on a white piqué dress, one of Constance's last year's travelling costumes, which Alma had considerably packed up for her in the box of summer clothing sent out for Lady Rivers, since the weather grew hot suddenly. It might have looked a little out of date in London, but no one was likely to find that fault with it at madame's *fête*, and even Ward had condescended to pronounce that it could not have fitted Miss West better if it had been made for her: and that though to be sure Lady Forrest's figure was "cementary itself," there was not a quarter of an inch anywhere between her and Miss Emmie. A broad

straw hat, freshly trimmed with the very same rose-coloured ribbons that had once given rise to a talk about the Kirkmans at Eccleston Square, lay on the table. Emmie had placed near it a bunch of half-opened May roses—Mary's roses, the loveliest and most richly-scented flower of the flowery neighbourhood, which all the country girls sought for in sunny spots, to wear on that particular day. Madelon had taken care that Emmie should have the finest blooms to be found on her own particular bush by the river, and Emmie, after fastening the fullest blown rose at her throat, was disposing of a bunch of pink buds and green leaves among her braids under her hat, when Wynyard entered.

He smiled when he saw what she was doing, but not the least cynically; the notion of vanity or coquetry would not have connected itself in his mind with Emmie West if he had surprised her at the glass a dozen times in a day, and he would as little have thought of paying her a compliment, or making the smallest remark to her about her looks, as he would to a child. Her simple, fresh-hearted enjoyment of her sunshiny holiday was, day after day, as he watched it, a delightful surprise, a sort of acted poem, to him which he would not have run the risk of disturbing for the world.

"That's right," he said, when she turned round from the glass and showed her fair face, as softly-coloured and sweet as her roses, and her clear happy eyes looking up from the deep rim of her hat. "That's right, I'm glad you are equipped to set forth at once on our enterprise,—‘the discomfiture of the grocer,’—it is time that you and I were on the scene of action, for the adverse forces are gathering already. I met the redoubtable blue *charette* bringing M. Bouchillon in a Paris coat and hat, and yellow kid gloves, and with, I am afraid, an immense box of *bon-bons* by his side, just as I left the village, while Antoine, poor boy, has been sheepishly hanging about the Place in his blouse all the morning, making himself quite common. What is to be done?"

"A coat!" cried Emmie; "how ridiculous it will look among the blouses."

"That is your opinion too, is it? I have been longing to change costumes with Joseph Marie all the

morning ; he has made himself sublime in a new blouse, and a bright red handkerchief hanging down from under his cap. I think I should have proposed the exchange to him, but I was afraid of losing my prestige as madame's cousin, which I mean to turn to account to-day in backing up Antoine against the *épiciers*. I have fought *épiciers* a good deal at different times in my life, but it's a new thing to be reckoning on a black coat and kid gloves as one's most effective weapons. In fact, Miss West, it strikes me that you and I are coming out in new characters expressly for madame's *fête*—'glasses of fashion' at which everybody will be looking. We have sat neglected in corners together, have we not ? and now we are going to shine forth."

"Do you know," said Emmie, smiling, "I remember that you talked to me about La Roquette, and the dancing under the chestnuts, that very evening. Shall I tell you the truth now ? I was wishing that you would go away all the time. I was afraid Aunt Rivers might not like even you to waste so much time upon me at her dance."

"Even me ! She has grown much kinder to me now, you see, for she lets me have the honour of taking care of you to the village. I am to bring Madelon too, am I not ? The beauty for whose favour these rivals in hat and blouse are to contend to-night. I have only had a passing glimpse of her as yet, and I am curious. Antoine is very confidential with me, but he confines his praises to her courage in digging, and her good soup and nature. I don't believe he knows whether she is pretty or not. When shall I see her ?

"She is not coming with us ; she turned shy at the last, and is walking to the village with her mother ; but we shall have plenty of company in the *charette*. La Fermière and all her boys are to sit with me in the back seat."

"We will see about that in a minute. Cannot the boys drive ? I will warrant 'Bibi' not to run away with us, or be more than an hour and a half in getting us to the château. You and I meanwhile will lay out our plans for this afternoon's campaign, when the triumph of true love, backed by such distinguished patronage as we two can give, is to be enacted before the whole village."

"Do you think madame will be vexed at what we are doing?" said Emmie, anxiously, when the *charette*, packed to suit Wynyard's views, was well under way, and the boys kept up such a perpetual "Yip, yip," to Bibi, that there was no danger of names being overheard. "I feel guilty for having told you about Madelon and Antoine. I am afraid Madame de Florimel may be hurt at your taking the opposite side to herself. We have no right to interfere, have we?"

"The right of the young to back up true feeling against worldly prudence all the world over," said Wynyard, quickly. "I don't say anything about you, but I at least have a right to protest against interested marriages, and to hate the tyranny that imposes them. I mean to look out for each chance of putting a spoke in the wheel of such arrangements as comes across me through my life."

His pleasant face darkened as he spoke with a sudden flush of anger and pain, and he paused, vexed with himself. He had thought it was all over—this passionate pain at least. He had been congratulating himself on the wisdom of his flight from London, where passing visions of Alma riding with Horace Kirkman in the park were apt to undo at a stroke the effect of a week's struggle, and he had assured himself that the last angry regret had died out of his heart at the sight of the illness and suffering on his old enemy Lady Rivers's face. For the last week or so he had even thought sometimes that if he were a poet he would celebrate the time of escape from an unhappy love into newly conquered content and freedom as the most beautiful victory of a life. And now here again in a moment came a poisoned arrow from the old trouble, striking with as deadly a sting as ever; testifying that it was living and unconquered still, and that it was influencing his present thoughts and actions in a way he had not suspected. The angry suffering was gone in a moment, however, as quickly as it came; he caught sight of a grieved expression on Emmie's tender face, and remorse for having even for a moment, even by a look, clouded her perfect pleasure, swept other thoughts from his mind for a time. He brought himself back from the abstract view towards which

his anger had carried him, to a more direct answer to her question.

"No," he said, "I don't think Madame de Florimel will be disappointed when her scheme falls to the ground. She is more or less prepared; her allies in the village have gradually deserted her, and I even think she will be glad of a move that will force her *protégé* to retire of his own accord. I shall represent to her that she has the merit of having raised Madelon's value in the eyes of the villagers by bringing such a distinguished wooer as M. Bouchillon to her feet, and that this skilful manœuvre has brought Antoine's parents to wish for the match they previously had despised, and so secured her favourite an advantageous settlement. She will be easily brought to think that all was her own contriving, and I venture to prophesy that before another week is over, Antoine and Madelon will be walking together through all the neighbouring valleys and villages, as is the custom here, to invite all the world to the wedding. You and I shall have to go with them on that occasion, I expect, in the character of best friends. I only hope they will make haste and have it before we leave for our mountain tour."

"But it is rather hard on M. Bouchillon to have been brought here only to be made to look so foolish as he will to-night, when Madelon refuses to dance with him."

"Not at all; he will in five seconds choose someone else, Jeannette, or Louison, or Baptista. He only wants a healthy village girl for a wife, who goes to mass regularly, and has good principles, and makes good soup. The gold chain he has brought with him, of which the whole village is talking, was merely intended for the *Someone* who would have him. He will be just as well pleased to see it round Baptista's neck as if Madelon wore it. He loves in the abstract, without troubling himself about particulars. Happy man to be so easily satisfied! It is the only safe way of loving, if one is to love at all, you may depend."

"Oh, no!" said Emmie, shrinking, and Wynyard was angry with himself again. A cynical word spoken to her, sounded so incongruous that it was almost an insult.

To secure that he should not offend again he turned to a different subject.

"Have you ever," he asked, "noticed particularly this bit of the hill-side we are passing now, with the pomegranate hedge, and a clump of cactuses in a hollow below? It has the curious effect upon me of taking me back to my childhood in India. I can't say whether because there was a hedge of cactus in my father's compound, or, as I hope, because one of the pictures my mother used to lift me up to look at, was a sketch of this spot done by herself when she stayed here. I incline to the last supposition, the association with my mother is so strong. The first time I came here when I was a boy of eight, walking up the hill with my uncle and Madame de Florimel, I remember feeling bewildered like a person in a dream at coming suddenly on such a familiar scene. It seemed to start out of my past life, and bring back all sorts of half-forgotten remembrances, and it awoke such a desperate longing for a sight of my mother's face again, that I remember it was hard work to march straight on without letting anyone see anything."

"But could you not have told them?"

"Boys don't know how to talk of mysteries like that; and besides, I think I knew my uncle well enough even then to understand that I could not commit a more deadly offence than to let him see I very much wanted anything he could not give me, least of all, my father and mother. I hardly know how the sense of guilt I had when a child for regretting them first came to me, but I remember the misery of it."

"Your uncle must have cared very much for you then. I don't think I should mind any sort of behaviour that came from too much caring for one."

"You, I dare say not, but unfortunately for my uncle I am not made up of such selfless materials, and as I grew older I resented the notion of being made a holocaust to old resentments, burnt up utterly in the fire of his disappointed egoism. I suppose you never happened to read anything of Jacob Böehme?"

"I! I never even heard of him," said Emmie, a little disappointed, as she often was in conversations with Wynyard, when just in the middle of a personal anecdote

or recollection he would start aside, and hunt a thought or an allusion back to some author she had never heard of.

"Of course not; it is not likely that the old mystic should have come in your way, but he has long been a great friend of mine, and a discourse of his on the four temperaments was in my mind when I spoke about my uncle. I was thinking that he belonged to what Böhme calls the order of people whose natures are grounded in elemental fire. A hungry yearning for power, or it may be for love, possesses them, and they feed their desires by drawing others' wills and hearts to theirs and absorbing them so utterly that their victims become mere fuel without any individuality left. These are the ambitious ruling spirits of the world, successful, but seldom or never happy."

"I hope I am not a fire-spirit, then," asked Emmie.

"You!" said Wynyard, looking at her with a smile, "no; I don't think there is the compelling power about you. You would not be so much afraid of Aunt Rivers if you were a fire-spirit. Yours is a much gentler attraction than the fierce rush of the fire. Your cousin Alma is more akin to the bright element that draws us poor wind-spirits into its neighbourhood to consume and destroy the life in us, and leave us exhausted and worthless. Luckily, however, the air-temperament has its power of escape and revenge. Sometimes we blow out the fire and get free, and then we are very happy in our freedom, and heal ourselves marvellously, finding the whole universe open to air, and in fact boundless. Look back at the range of mountains behind us; are not the colours about the Chèvre d'Or fine? The dark blues on his cavernous left side softening up into the lilac of his head, which melts again into the dazzling whiteness of the snow-peaks behind. To think that all that beauty is due to *air*—bare rocks, as hard and barren as our worst troubles, and air to see them through. I think we may be very thankful to be grounded in the yielding temperament, don't you?"

"Am I an air-spirit too, then?"

"Unless there is something of the earth element in your nature, I am not sure."

"Is it something bad?" asked Emmie anxiously.

"Böehme gives it the highest possibilities of all, and says that the noblest spirits are inclosed in the earth element during their sojourn in time; but it is something of a prison to them, they yearn upwards from it to God, and can only receive the good of life through love, divine or human. Without that, they are dark and melancholy, but when love delivers them, they are capable of the utmost self-devotion—giving out from their dark ground the most beautiful gifts, without asking anything for themselves but the fostering warmth of love—as the earth turns sunshine into food and verdure and flowers."

"Yes, I think I understand," said Emmie; "but what are the water-people like?"

"They poorly imitate the qualities of the fire-type, but with them all is illusion, for though like the fire-people their nature is to absorb instead of to give out, they, after the manner of water, hold shifting reflections and images only in their hearts—notions, not realities, which they inclose coldly and easily let go. They have, however, the persistence which water has in undermining and subtly finding its way, and they divide will-power pretty evenly perhaps with their fire opposites, though they gain their ends slowly and with much less show and noise. There are lots of water-people in the world, you may depend upon it. Would it be impertinent to put down your Aunt Rivers, and perhaps Lady Forrest, among, let us say, the more estimable of the Naiads? It needs all the four elements, you see (according to Böehme), to make up human nature, and we must not quarrel with what comes to us."

"For all that, I should not like to be a water-person. What do you make out Madame de Florimel to be?"

"Look at her," cried Wynyard, for by this time they had entered the village and were drawing up in front of the chestnut-shaded Place, where Madame de Florimel always received her birthday guests, there being no level space in the château garden for dancing. "Look at her as she stands there with her little court round her, stately and smiling, moving as lightly and laughing as merrily as that little girl whose cheek she is stooping to pinch just now. Look, and say if anything but air could clothe a

defeated life and a lonely old age with such colours, blotting out its regrets and sorrows in sympathetic reflected happiness, as the Chèvre d'Or hides its crags and chasms in purple glory. Hurrah! for the air-people's power of escape from themselves, I say. It is a great gift. But here comes Joseph Marie to take the *charette*. Does he not look triumphant? Madame's *fête* is the crowning season of the year to him. All the old men of the neighbourhood are already drinking and praising his wine down there at the bottom of the Place, and by-and-by the girls will be invited to eat some watery strawberries which he and madame between them have coaxed to grow in the château gardens, and of which he is as proud as if he had created them himself. He is not sure that he has not something to do with the fact that the chestnuts are in fuller flower this year than usual. Let me help you to get down; we must clear our heads of mysticism and turn to the business of the evening. Ah, there is M. Bouchillon himself coming up to madame to present his box of *bon-bons* before the whole village! They will be won over in a body by the grace with which he is making his felicitations, unless we hasten to interpose a counter attraction. Madame, who hates presents, is smiling, I am afraid, on that *bon-bon* box. Let us go forward and distract her attention before everyone in the commune has discovered that the giver is her favourite."

The Place was a square level piece of ground that lay just below the château, fronting the principal village street, and overlooked by the church on a rising ground beyond the little river. The tall magnolias at the end of the château garden flanked one side, and just now cast a pleasant shadow, in which madame's fauteuil and two or three rows of seats for special friends had been set out by Joseph Marie. The benches at the upper end of the square among the chestnut-trees were, however, still the most popular places of resort. Old women with their knitting, women with babies, had established themselves there an hour or two before, and now groups of young men in clean blouses and girls in white caps or shady hats were gathering and waiting for the music to strike up.

This was a long-established village festival, or, even

in honour of madame, the thrifty villagers would not have been tempted from work in their fields so early in the afternoon. As the *fête* fell on Madame de Florimel's birthday it had become a custom with her to make herself the patroness of the occasion, so far as providing a cask of her own wine went, paying the musicians, and coming out to sit under the magnolias and chat with everybody who liked to claim her notice. Madame's conduct in this matter of the *fête* was felt by all her neighbours to be manifestly English, for what was the sense of giving away good wine in a promiscuous indiscriminating manner which did not provoke individual gratitude or necessitate return? When the custom was first instituted, indeed, there had not been wanting captious spirits, headed by the landlords of the two *cabarets*, who insisted that such a slighting of sound wine had something anti-national and unpatriotic about it, and was designed to cast a doubt on the supremacy of the French people.

As years went on, however, and madame's peculiarities, English or otherwise, were found invariably to conduce to the advantage of those who dealt with her, a greater sense of confidence sprang up, and among the young people of the neighbourhood at least, madame's *fête* came to be looked upon as the happiest day of the year. Her presence, her gaiety, her pleasant notice of one and another, gave it an interest that was wanting at other *fêtes*. The strictest of the mothers were apt to relax their surveillance somewhat when "madame" was sitting by to encourage the young people in enjoying themselves, and if, as many people have averred, there were a greater number of love-matches made in La Roquette than in most French villages, it was perhaps owing to the fact that "madame," the greatest match-maker of the neighbourhood, had always a weakness towards aiding a preference that could be traced back to a lingering walk under the chestnut-trees on her own *fête* day.

To sit by Madame la Comtesse on the château chairs was a distinction capriciously meted out by the owner of them to special favourites, on her birthday. She had a habit of gathering the best, and it must be confessed also the prettiest, of the young girls about her by "nods and

becks," and gracious little compliments, remembered and repeated among themselves for all the rest of the year. Once seated under the magnolias the girls' chances for good partners were secured for the evening, as no young man of any pretensions to merit could condescend to take a partner from the throng by the chestnuts when a magnolia bud still remained to be secured.

"Now you know what a great deal of dancing you will have to go through," Wynyard said, when he had explained all this to Emmie, and placed her on a chair between Madame de Florimel and Madelon. "I know you can dance, for did we not once perform the Lancers together in Eccleston Square when almost everybody else had gone in to supper,—and to-day, instead of being ciphers, we have an important part to play in a village drama. We have to prevent Madelon from proclaiming herself the grocer's bride by dancing in the first dance with him, and encourage her to distinguish her old lover so decidedly as to pique M. Bouchillon into making another choice. Our work begins at once, for see, here comes M. Bouchillon, intent upon joining himself on to Madelon and her mother; intercept him if you can, and keep him in conversation while I hunt Antoine out of the sulky shyness he is indulging among the bowl-players down there. He is ruining himself by such conduct. I expressly forbade him to touch a bowl to-day; it stamps him as a jilted suitor before the whole world."

Emmie's power of keeping up a conversation in French was put to a severe test during the next ten minutes. M. Bouchillon's politeness and secret interest in *la belle Anglaise*, of whom everyone was talking, prevented her being made aware of her deficiencies too plainly, and she managed to be still asking questions about the road to Clelles, which she and her aunt would probably be following in about ten days from now, when the music struck up. Then she felt rather than saw—for her back was turned to the magnolias—that Wynyard had reappeared, walking side by side with the young farmer in his blouse, and that both were standing before Madelon and her mother. She eagerly brought out another question, professing great anxiety for an

answer, and though M. Bouchillon betrayed some uneasiness, he made her fully comprehend his reply before he turned round. Then it was too late. Madame Claire had yielded to her daughter's pleading eyes, or to something that this amiable relation of madame's had contrived to insinuate in Antoine's favour; and, there, in sight of all the village, on this important day, was Antoine leading Madelon before madame's nose to the first place in the dance, precisely as it had been last year, and as if no scheme for Madelon's advancement to city life had been on the *tapis*.

Baptista's colour heightened, and Louison felt under her cap to assure herself that her new earrings were properly in sight. Something must have taken a wrong turn in the marriage negotiations at the orange-tree house, and M. Bouchillon and his blue *charette* were still in the market.

"Now," cried Wynyard, turning to Emmie, "it is for us to follow their lead and dance *vis-à-vis* to that shame-faced pair, to give them courage. It must be seen that Madelon's choice is sanctioned by madame's English friends, or our object is only half-done. Won't you come?"

That was an idyllic dance to Emmie, often thought of in after days, but never equalled. The sunshine, the simple music, the laughter of the village children playing under the chestnuts, the broadly-smiling faces all round, a subtle sense of the pleasure with which so many admiring eyes followed her own and her partner's movements; but beyond all, the aura of friendship and sympathetic sharing in a mystery of love which the four dancers interchanged by look and smile and finger-touch, as often as they passed and repassed each other in the complicated figure of the dance, made it something never to be forgotten or repeated in after-life. Wynyard experienced something of the same feeling, and to him it came consciously and translated itself into thought. His gaiety, which had been somewhat forced since his allusion to Alma on the drive, grew natural and hearty again, and his triumph over M. Bouchillon was untinged by personal bitter recollections. The sweet summer sunshine, the simple happi-

ness that pervaded the very air, were bringing more than healing, they were bringing new life, opening springs of emotion and joy that he had believed sealed for ever. "If one could but live always in Arcadia, if one could but escape from the rush of ambition, from the overwhelming stress and responsibility of more complex forms of life, and go back to nature among friendly people like these, with a tender face like Emmie West's at one's side, a gentle sympathetic heart and mind in one's keeping, responsive as a pure mirror to every thought, breathing out soothing instead of unrest. If one could forget the past and live so——." And then the music stopped, the dance was over, and Wynyard found himself strolling slowly back towards the magnolias at Emmie's side.

"You don't want to sit down again just yet, do you?" he said. "If you will come to the other side of the Place we shall get a new view of the mountains, and I can point out the road we shall all be mounting next week, when Madame de Florimel takes us to her eyrie in the mountains near Clelles. I heard you cross-questioning M. Bouchillon just now. You can trace miles of the road from the high ground beyond the chestnuts."

The lower end of the Place was almost deserted when they reached it, for a game at bowls had just ended, and the players were gathering round a shed where Joseph Marie presided over the distribution of madame's wine. The ground rose steeply here to a high bank, and when she had mounted it, Emmie commanded a view of the whole range of mountains that sheltered La Roquette from the north wind.

"There," said Wynyard, "do you see something hanging on to the top of that peak up in the sky, a long way off? If you have good eyes you can make out lines and spires that are too regular to be natural projections of the rock. That is St. Valière, our first night's resting-place on our journey; now look lower down the mountain-side, and you will see shadowy lines rising one above the other—that is the winding road, and a splendid road it is, we shall follow to get there."

"Shall we be able to see this valley and the village when we are up there?"

"We shall have a magnificent view of the whole country spread out like a map below us, but whether this particular valley and village will be distinguishable from others I can't say."

"I shall make it out, I think," said Emmie, "for we shall have left it for ever then, you know."

"Let us climb the hill to the church, and I will show you something else."

The *Angelus* sounded while they were crossing the Place, and when they came out on the road they met a few old women and girls who had slipped away from the crowd under the trees, to kneel for a few moments in the church. Candles were lighted and altars decked for the *fête*, and Wynyard and Emmie went to the open door to peep in; just then Antoine and Madelon passed them, and entering went to an altar and knelt down side by side. Involuntarily Emmie glanced back at Wynyard, and they exchanged a congratulatory smile.

"Madame Claire must have given them leave," said Emmie in a whisper, "or Madelon would not have come."

"Fortunate people!" answered Wynyard. "*They* are in earnest enough one sees, and have early come to the end of their story. Well, we have done a good day's work, have we not? If we come back here twenty years hence, how those two will talk to us about to-day."

The plural pronouns slipped out quite involuntarily, but directly they were spoken, Wynyard was aware of the significant sound the sentence had, and saw too that the surprise which had first come into Emmie's eyes had changed into something else before she lowered them. Was it reproof, or rather was it not overpowering consciousness? The soft line of her cheek and the curve of her white neck, which was all he could see as she turned from him, were dyed crimson. He had had no business to say it, and he would not offend her for the world, but he could not at the moment feel as sorry for his thoughtlessness as he ought. He felt as if he had got out of his ordinary self this evening

into a new world, with new possibilities that had often been near him, but never recognised till just now. His voice had a tone that Emmie had never heard in it before when he spoke to her again, though the words had nothing in them, and were merely spoken to break the silence that was growing too long.

"Madame is lucky in the season on which her birthday falls, since so many anniversaries of it were fated to be celebrated here. She would have been puzzled how to manage an out-door *fête* in England now, but here it is the crowning time of the year. It would be impossible to crowd more beauty into a day than this one has given us. I could fancy it a meeting-day between spring and summer, when for a few hours they have brought their perfections together to make a day of Paradise. Yesterday there was hardly such a rich flush of green over the vineyards and hill-sides, and to-morrow its first freshness will have faded a little."

"Oh no!" cried Emmie quickly. It will get more beautiful every day *here*. I am only sorry that you showed me the road to London to-day, for I can't help looking at it, and remembering that when we are on it, we shall have left all this behind us."

"Let us call it the road to St. Valier till we get there," said Wynyard. "I don't mean to cheat myself out of a day of my holiday by thinking about what is to come at the end. I am drawing largely on the future by taking such a long one this year, and it ought to have stores of strength and rest in it to go upon till—I can't say when. Don't you think that when you and I meet in Saville Street—say on some such foggy day as that one when my cousin and I brought Miss Moore home with a broken head—we shall get a great deal of sunshine out of imagining ourselves back again at the church door of La Roquette while the *Angelus* was ringing, and Madelon and Antoine were strolling up the hill between the quince-trees, with the afternoon light on their faces? Don't you think we can manage to make a sufficiently strong spell from that to keep the fog out of our thoughts at least?"

"Yes, I do," said Emmie softly.

And Wynyard's conscience pricked him again, but

more feebly this time, for he thought he meant, and more than meant, all that his words implied. And why should he not do his best to go back cured, and better than cured, safe for ever from the regrets and angers that he had found so miserably disabling and useless? Why force himself to believe that there were no real jewels in the world because the one he had coveted first had proved a mere bit of tinsel?

"The women are coming out of church," he said a moment later. "Their *fête* day *chapelet* has been duly said, and they are ready for their dancing and their gossip again. We had better go back to the magnolias, or madame will think we are setting the villagers a bad example. You must dance with Antoine next time to complete his glorification, and I will ask Madelon to be your *vis-à-vis*, and then we shall have given the villagers enough to talk about."

Emmie was relieved, and perhaps a little surprised, to be received quite cordially by madame, and welcomed back to the coveted seat at her right hand. There were no cold looks to mar her pleasure that day, though Wynyard danced again with her twice. Everybody smiled upon her; even M. Bouchillon requested the honour of her hand from madame, and performed the last quadrille with her in a style which was considered by Baptista and her mother to eclipse by a long way Wynyard's characterless dancing.

By the time this last dance was over, and cups of English tea dispensed under the magnolias, and swallowed with heroic determination by madame's favourites, La Fermière and her boys had packed themselves into the *charette*, and were waiting impatiently for Emmie to join them. Even on *fête* days at La Roquette the heads of families insisted on early hours, for to-morrow's work must not be trenched upon.

Madame had a little word for Emmie when she came up to say good-night, that made her cheeks once more that day out-colour her May roses.

"So, so, thou hast a will of thine own, little one. One guesses how it is that thy heart is set on advocating the English way; but I will wait to write to thy mother till I can send her a little message that I have made in

my head already. I do not think *now* that she has neglected to think of thy future, however English her way of acting may be ;” and then madame stooped down and kissed Emmie on both cheeks, looking into her eyes between times with a meaning smile that quite took away Emmie’s breath, and put an end to all chance of her getting said the birthday congratulations she had reserved to this last minute.

Joseph Marie was to drive the *charette* up the hill, and the boys, a little excited and noisy, had secured the places near the driver for themselves, leaving room for Emmie near the door. Wynyard came out into the road to help her in, and to wrap a shawl of madame’s round her, for the air had turned chilly after the sunset.

“ Well,” he said, as they were starting, “ it has been a splendid day, and it is over, but we are not going to regret it, are we ? It’s the *first* day of summer, not the *last* day of spring, remember, and things are to go on getting better and better, you settled that.”

Two hours later, when the Place was quite deserted, and the twinkling lights in the village street and in the houses on the distant hills were disappearing one after the other, till the whole scene was left to a garment of moonlight, Wynyard came through the side garden door again, and paced up and down under the magnolias. He had been having rather a sharp argument with Madame de Florimel—one of those word battles which generally began and ended in playful teasing, but which were apt to have a belt of earnestness between, when a word or two was sometimes said that left a sting, or at least matter for thought and self-questioning behind it. To-night a good deal of the talk had been in earnest, and Wynyard had said and heard much that he wanted to look at over again, under the calming influence of the moonlight. He had grown a little hot perhaps in defending his meddling in Antoine’s affairs, and he had said some bitter things which he was obliged to acknowledge to himself were still so persistently in his mind that they would rush out whenever they were challenged. Yet *that*, after all, was not the point which occupied him most. Some quiet words of Madame de Florimel’s, at the end of all the heat, while they

were making friends, caused the disturbance that had sent him into the fresh air to cool his head. Words that took for granted the mutual attraction between himself and Emmie, and represented it as a fact too transparent for any looker-on during the last three weeks to be in any doubt about it, unless—and in this lay the sting—unless there were indeed some deeper likeness between himself and his mother than that eagerness of speech and vivacity of manner which Madame de Florimel was fond of commenting on. Wynyard's idea of himself was that he was even too persistent in all his likings and prejudices. Was it so, or was his consistency in this one matter, which, eminently to one of his affectionate nature was the making or marring of a life, slipping away from him? If so, was it a matter for self-disgust or for intense rejoicing? Should he open his arms to let in the possible new love, or sternly order it away to cling to what—a bitter recollection of the woman who had chosen Horace Kirkman instead of himself, after playing with his love for years.

Wynyard had left the château garden and come out into the Place, because he could not think out this question in a place that had an association which Madame de Florimel's words had made a little disturbing to-night—the picture, namely, which she had often drawn for him of his mother and his uncle on the day when they had come up the marble steps from the lower garden hand-in-hand to tell her of the engagement that was never to be fulfilled. The suggestion that there might be an inherited taint of fickleness, or at least of the hasty impulsive yielding that had made his mother a traitor, was not welcome just now, when the matter in hand seemed to be a conquest over a too persistent longing for what was beyond his reach. What virtue could there be in holding on to an angry pain felt to be a clog and hindrance to the best part of his life, if by right and healthful means it could be effectually exorcised? If, as Madame de Florimel hinted, he had inadvertently won that fresh, sweet, simple heart——. Wynyard checked his rapid pace as this thought presented itself, and his eye fell suddenly on a May rosebud

that lay in his path, where his next step would have crushed it into the dust.

He stooped, picked it up, and laid it on his hand. It must have fallen from Emmie West's hat when she stood just here wishing Madame de Florimel good-night an hour or two ago. Wynyard remembered that he had noticed the flower touching her fair flushed cheek and her delicate ear when she turned from him after the look they had exchanged by the church door. Then he smiled rather bitterly at himself as the remembrance came back to his mind of a time long ago when he had picked up a faded flower from the ground—a camellia, dropped from Alma's dress on to the dusty floor of a London ball-room, which he had secured as a priceless treasure and kept for weeks. One could not without some self-contempt be as foolish as that for more than one woman, he thought, and he made a hasty movement to toss the rosebud into the path again. No, he could not, it was too like Emmie West for that—too beautiful, and fresh, and pure to lie in the dust. He compromised the matter by slipping it somewhat carelessly into his button-hole, and when he resumed his walk, and his thoughts calmed down and gradually assumed the shape of plans, he was aware every now and then of the subtle arrowy perfume of the flower breathed up into his face, and claiming a recognition in an under-current of consciousness that kept crossing his soberer reflections with tender fancies and golden gleams of hope. He would not be hasty, there was no need for haste; and yet there was equally no need for withdrawal in any degree from the intimacy which he felt had somewhat changed its character to-night. He resolved that the holiday up to the end of that journey to Clelles of which they had spoken should be a complete holiday, one of those rare times for living in, and enjoying the present, without backward or forward glances such as come into busy earnest lives, like oases of greenness and refreshment, good to look back upon. Decisive questions might be left to settle themselves leisurely in Saville Street when work-days had begun again. The May Rose—his May Rose—Wynyard said to himself, with a quiet content stealing

into his heart, was not, as he well knew, a fine-weather flower only, but might be trusted to breathe its delicate fragrance in dark as well as in sunny days.

CHAPTER XXII.

A LORD OF BURLEIGH.

Junge Herzen reich an Liebes wonne
 Ueber allen hoch die Frühlingssonne
 Tretet ein geofnet sind die Pforten
 Und ein Paradies ist aller Orten.

Cease, dreams, the images of day-desires,
 To model forth the passions of the morrow;
 Never let rising sun approve you liars
 To adduce more grief to aggravate my sorrow.
 Still let me sleep, embracing clouds in vain,
 And never wake to feel the day's disdain.

THE windows of "Air Throne" stood wide open, and an incessant melody of rumbling wheels in the street far below, and shrill twittering of sparrows in the eaves, came through, with now and then a hot puff of smoke from a neighbouring chimney, bringing a cloud of smuts to settle unheeded on the bare tables and the empty easel. The place had a strangely forlorn unused look, in spite of the spring sunshine that poured in at the casements and made dusty squares of light on the floor. There was, however, no one to notice its unnatural appearance but Mildred West, who having suddenly recollected that more than three weeks ago she had promised Christabel Moore to attend to the airing of her rooms in her absence, had rushed up and thrown the windows wide. Then having spied out a book of Katherine's, left on a distant dusty shelf, she carried it to the hearth-rug, and was now seated before the empty grate, with her elbows propped on the Skeleton's box, greedily devouring the contents of her prize. Of late Mildie's opportunities of securing a free half-hour for the absorbed reading which was a prime necessity of existence with her, had been too rare to admit of her being at all fastidious as to the circumstances under which the treat was taken. She could read standing upright on the stairs, while the Gentle Lamb was squirting water down on to her head from an upper

story, by way of experimenting on the old practice of torture by water; or in the twilight of the shoe-hole, where Mary Ann occasionally imprisoned her in bitter exasperation at the disastrous result of her efforts to supply Emmie's place by volunteer work downstairs.

The safety and solitude of "Air Throne," let it be ever so unlike itself, might be supposed to supply all that was needed for absolute enjoyment, but, as we said before, Mildie was not altogether the dry student she supposed herself. There were avenues to her soul that were reached by other than her favourite ways of taking in knowledge; and now, while she believed herself to be wholly occupied in an attempt to understand the mechanism of the ear, the outside aspect of the place was stealing into her mind without her having given it leave to be noticed, and was gradually drawing her thoughts into a new channel. After a while the pensive spell grew too strong to be resisted; she left a page unturned, dropped her head into her clasped hands, and allowed the underlying thoughts to come to the front.

What a long time it was, to be sure, since that evening when she had brought Mr. Anstice up here, and Casabianca had made him sit on the Skeleton's box. How different "Air Throne" had looked then. How still more striking were the changes that had come over the people then assembled round the fire. It was winter then, to be sure, and now it was spring, but the passing of one season into another did not use to bring anything to remark upon. Spring generally stayed outside Saville Street, or only entered in the form of glaring sunshine and hot dust. Emmie, as her letters showed, had got into a new sort of spring this year, and Katherine had filled two sheets with a description of a mountain ramble, instead of with the abstract of a lecture she had promised; and Christabel—that was the strangest of all—Saville Street had not kept the spring out of her face on the day when she had told Mildie about the sketching tour she had planned with a friend, and asked her to take care of her rooms and of her letters in her absence. How fresh and bright she had looked on the morning when she left the house early, in a new white piqué dress that surely ought to have been kept for Sunday wear,

and with a white felt hat on her head, that would have seemed babyish on anyone else, but which made her look—like an angel, Mildie thought, or, yes—a bride. Then a vision of Christabel as she looked that morning came back, and Mildred's thoughts hovered over it, taking it all in as she had hardly done at the time.

A pure white dazzling vision, strangely unlike the Christabel who used to flit up and downstairs behind Katherine, like her shadow, pale and dim. There had been plenty of colour and light in the face that Mildie now recalled, and tried to read as she had not thought to read it at the time. What a soft dewy light there was in the large eyes, whose beauty, Mildie believed, no one had ever noticed but herself (people were so stupid); and what a trembling smile on the red lips, with something wistful and troubled on the face too, now she came to think about it, which caused her some surprise. For she does not care so much about me, Mildred thought, as to be troubled at bidding me good-bye, and she said she was coming back in a fortnight. Why did she seem almost sorry to go away for such a short absence, and why, just at the last, when the cab that was to take her to the station was at the door, did she run back into the inner room and kneel for a moment by Katherine's bed, as if she had forgotten to say her prayers that morning? People were certainly very strange this year, and their ways were harder to comprehend than the mysteries of acoustics, which Katherine's book promised to make quite plain-sailing in time, if one could but give one's mind to it.

Then Mildie wondered if she ought to have told anyone about Christabel's strange behaviour that morning. Yet, who was there to tell? Mrs. Urquhart was away in Devonshire, and the doctor hardly ever at home, to say nothing of the utter impossibility of stopping him in his rapid flights up and downstairs to tell him such a story. Mamma, herself, no—not if everybody in the world were going away to be married secretly, could Mildie have given her mother a fresh cause for anxiety just then. She could not knowingly add a straw's weight to the load of care under which her mother was sinking—yes, sinking. How grave Dr. Urquhart had

looked after his interview the other day, and how seriously he had talked of the necessity of persuading Emmie to come home earlier than her late letters promised. Poor, unsuspecting, blind Emmie! If she understood how things were going on at home now; would she write long letters about village dances and flowers, as if one could be quite happy, and forget one's whole family, and all the troubles in the world, just because the sun was shining?

Mildie, feeling as if she stood upon a height of sad experiences, looked with a little contempt upon the childishness into which Emmie and Christabel appeared to have descended lately. If falling in love (and Mildie had not been as unobserving as her mother of the frequent recurrence of Wynyard's name in the La Roquette letters) meant such stupid preoccupation, such selfish folly—nay, such deceit, as the conduct of her two former models appeared to witness to, just now—if falling in love necessarily dragged one down into such depths as these, Mildie registered a vow that she would faithfully keep clear of any such calamity in her own life. She would never fall in love—no, not if a mathematician, who had discovered a new planet, like Adams, or a philosopher as great as Humboldt should come to ask her. Neither Emmie nor Christabel had had temptations of this nature. Wynyard Anstice might be clever, but he always slipped away from the discussion of any topic of real moment. And as for the cousin, Mildie remembered that when he had called on Christabel, about a week after Katherine left, and she had chanced to look in during his visit, she had found him before Christabel's easel, pretending to have a drawing-lesson, but not working earnestly, for he and Christabel were laughing over his failures like two silly children. Contemptible, indeed, to fall in love with a man who could not even draw as well as herself.

Was that one of the boys coming to summon her to tea already, and had she wasted a whole hour of the afternoon? No, there was no one in the house now who ran upstairs with such a light springy step, unless—Mildred sprang up without waiting to complete her conjecture, and found it already answered, for the door

opened, as she turned round, and Christabel stood in the entrance. Christabel, certainly, though to Mildie's startled eyes it was not quite the same Christabel she had been used to see enter that room, nor yet the radiant vision in the white piqué dress to whom she had bidden good-bye three weeks ago. Had she grown an inch or two taller, or what was there in her present appearance which arrested on Mildie's lip the remonstrance for coming back without due notice, which occurred at the first moment of surprise? This new Christabel who walked straight to the table and seized at once on a heap of Katherine's letters lying there, did not look a person to be scolded so easily as that other one had used to be.

"So you are come?" was all Mildie ventured, when, after tearing open and devouring the contents of the latest letter, Christabel turned to shake hands with her. "So you are come back? Has Mary Ann seen you yet?"

"Not yet," said Christabel, laughing. "The Gentle Lamb opened the door for me, and helped my box into the hall, but I hope Mary Ann will forgive me for coming back, as I have brought her a present, and one for you, too, Mildie; so please to leave off staring at me with such wide-open eyes. What is the matter with me? Have I changed into someone else since I went away?"

Christabel smiled as she spoke, and yet a sudden rush of colour came up and dyed her cheeks under Mildie's scrutinising gaze—nay, her very smile had a sort of defiant consciousness in it that a stupider person than Mildie might have noticed.

"I don't know," answered Mildie, bluntly. "Where have you been?"

"To several places," said Christabel; "farther away, perhaps, than I thought to travel when I stood here last; but that won't make my presents less welcome, I hope."

"I don't know," repeated Mildie. "Does Katherine know where you have been?"

"Katherine has been travelling herself, and I see that my letters have missed her, but she has not been uneasy, I knew I should find a great budget here."

"Why don't you take off your hat and your gloves?" said Mildie, a little falteringly, when Christabel had taken up another letter and begun to read it.

Christabel did not speak at once, but she put down her letter and looked at Mildie, and for a second the dreamy blue and the honest grey eyes encountered each other. Mildie, whose consciousness of honest intention was at first stronger than her suspicion that she had been impertinent, tried hard to hold out, but at last her obstinate lids fell, and her cheeks crimsoned.

"My dear child," said Christabel, slowly, "when your mother asks me any questions I shall be ready to answer them, and in the meantime I think you had better go downstairs and ask Mary Ann to send me some tea, for I have had a long journey to-day."

Mildie escaped from the room without another look; but the instant the door closed behind her, Christabel gathered all Katherine's letters into a heap in her lap, sank down into the nearest chair, and covered her face with her gloved hands.

"There," she said to herself. "I have fought my first little battle, taken my first step in concealment, and it was horrid—horrid. Will every day, every hour, bring something like it? Will the burden be always as heavy as it is now, when I have only carried it one day? I did not know how hard it would be when I promised; how even the reading of Katherine's letters would be poisoned, because they were not written to *me*, but to that other self whom I left behind me nearly a month ago. But I must not lose heart just because he is not here at my side to make it seem right. He has gone to do what is as hard to him as concealment from Katherine is to me, and till that is accomplished I will bear my part. I must do now what I could not make up my mind to do while he was with me. I must make my left hand tell a lie, and look like Christabel Moore's hand again, which it is not."

Then, hearing sounds of someone mounting the stairs, Christabel drew off her gloves, and with them two rings, from the third finger of her left hand, which she slipped on to a little chain of Katherine's hair she always wore round her neck. When, a minute after, Mildie entered, carrying a tea-tray, she found her standing before the empty grate, with her hands resting on the chimney-piece, looking fixedly at them, with quite the old dreamy

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expression on her small pale face. It relieved Mildie immensely, for she felt that she had again got someone in the house whom she could influence, and order about and bully a little when she thought it needful.

"You did not suppose that Mary Ann would bring up your tea herself, did you?" she began. "You will find you won't get anything just now, unless you go down for it yourself, or come to me to help you. It's lucky the weather's so warm, for we have given up having a boy to help, and Mrs. Urquhart's servant has gone with her into the country, and there's no one to do anything but Mary Ann. As to carrying trays to the attics, of course she won't."

"Never mind," said Christabel, rousing herself, "I have not grown into a useless log during my holiday; I shall soon fall into my old ways, and give very little trouble."

"Except in answering the door to—to your visitors," observed Mildie meaningly. "Christabel, I want to tell you something."

"Well."

"The old watchmaker has called four or five times while you were away to ask for you, and papa heard him talking to the Gentle Lamb in the hall one evening, and he was dreadfully annoyed. He told mamma afterwards that he would not allow lodgers in the house if they were to have callers and his children had to open the door to them."

"I will explain it to David myself. The Gentle Lamb shall not have to open the door to him again," said Christabel.

"Or—or to—other people," stammered Mildie.

"Or to the only other person who ever does come to see me, I promise you," said Christabel with dignity. "No, I am not angry, but you had better leave me now, for I have all these letters of Katherine's to read and answer before bed-time."

Though Christabel glanced eagerly through her letters as soon as she was left alone, it was but a hurried search through the pages, to gather the bare facts, leaving the intermediate sentences of loving anxiety and conjecture as to her own doings unread;

neither did she take up the letters again and prepare to answer them when her slight meal was finished. She took a low seat by the window, and sat for more than an hour, watching the slow fading of the daylight from that little square of sky between the heads of two chimney-stacks, which had been hers and Katherine's summer prospect for so many evenings of the two past years. When the darkness drove her at last to leave the window and light her lamp, and she had replenished the dried-up ink in her inkstand, she took a note-book from her travelling-bag instead of a sheet of paper, and began to write in it.

"Yes, dear Katherine," she scribbled rapidly, "I will write my real daily letter to you here, before I begin that other one that has to go by the post, which will not be real, and which I shall write with double pain to-day, in this room so full of your true face, and with no other face opposite me to explain my conduct to myself. Will what I have written here day by day explain it to you, when I put this book into your hand, and ask you to read it from beginning to end, or shall I see in your dear eyes, as you look up, that contempt for me—for us—I have noticed there sometimes when you have spoken or heard of people who, in order to clutch at some great joy, had acted unworthily? Will any explanation make you understand my love for a man, who, having a right to his own will in this matter of marrying me, was not strong enough to take it openly, at the risk of opposition and entreaties from one he dreads to pain? My *so* loving him, that I consented to put the pain on you, Kitty, and on myself, to spare that other? We are the strongest, darling—and have you not told me often that our part is to bear, and bear for pity and humanity you say, and now I say for love? Why should we love the strong and not the weak, when they hold out their hands to us, and say: 'You only can help me to be the best there is in me to be, only you?' But what is the use of all these words which rush into my mind with the tears to my eyes that are hindering my writing? You will see their sophistry as I do, even while I write them. You will say that I have not been helping him up, but dragging him down, by consenting to the weakness of his first step, and that it is a bad omen for

the future. You would not have done it, darling, I know, but—well—we throw ourselves at your feet, and ask you not to despise us. I will give up trying to explain to you why I love him. I will not make any more pretences even to myself. I don't think him a great genius, as I fancied at first, but he is my lover, my husband, he has picked me out of all the world—*me*—to love—and I love him, and there is nothing more to be said. Oh yes, I shall find a thousand things to say in his praise, when you let me talk to you about him, on that first happy day, when you know the whole truth, and your anger at the concealment is over, and you are letting me show you how it was with me after you left me alone! How the fancy world in which I had lived so long crumbled away from me bit by bit, to let this one reality, my love for him, stand clear, and I felt like a person rising up from a long dream, to stand bare, but glad in the daylight. I am perhaps paying the penalty of having dreamed so long, by being now so shut up in the supreme feeling that has awakened me, yet can I fear, or be cold while my sun shines upon me?

“When you have read as far as this page you will have followed us through the whole wonderful month of our wedding journey, and I hope you will forgive me, when I confess that in spite of twinges of conscience, I have shared the delight he has taken in throwing an air of adventure and romance over every step of the way. What a great deal seems to be crowded into that short time now I look back upon it. How the horizon of life has widened round me as the days passed on, and how brightly he has led me forward, taking a sort of child-like delight in surprising me with glimpses of worldly prosperity and ease, such as, you know, and he knows, I never dreamed of stepping into, through my marriage with him; hinting sometimes at a further surprise that will dazzle me in the future. As if anything could dazzle me when the wonder of such love as he gives me is filling my eyes so full of light that I can see nothing else!

“What dear jokes we had, about Fortunatus's purse, during the first few days we were together, when I tried hard to economise the magic coins, so as to have to return the little old charmed purse to its owner as seldom

as possible. What endless amusement he seemed to find in admiring my economical feats, till that day came, after we had been married about a week, when I told him seriously that I thought we ought to take our sketching-boards and begin to work, and he, looking penitent and almost sorrowful, broke it to me that he was not an artist at all. Nothing half so good, he said, but would I forgive him, and take him for what he was, an idle fellow, whose life had been worthless till he fell in love with me? That evening, when we were out walking, he stopped me by a gate in a shady lane, and pointing over fields and woods, to a gleaming white house on a distant hill, he asked me, 'Should I feel at all like the Lady of Burleigh, if one day he should take me to a great old place like that, and tell me it was mine and his?'

"I am afraid he was disappointed, do you know, Katherine—that I stood silent, showing no curiosity, and asking no questions, for a great fear and awe fell over me, and I could only clasp his arm tightly and hold my breath. I don't think it was quite the Lady Burleigh feeling of regret that the life I had looked forward to—the life of working with him, and helping him—was all a dream: I think that expectation had been falling away from me ever since our wedding morning. It was rather a sudden dread lest I had done a greater wrong than I knew, and taken some great lot stealthily that was not meant for me, and that I should never be happy or feel right in. It was a momentary feeling, but it checked his impulse to confidence, and the next morning I could see he was glad to get back to our Fortunatus's purse-play again. He was pleased to find me unwilling to break the charm of blind dependence on him, and of looking into a golden future, of which he only holds the key. He reminded me that I had once said I would rather have Fortunatus's purse than a great estate, and said, half-seriously, half-playfully, that I might take my choice when I liked, but that, for his part, he should vote for Fortunatus's purse, at all events, for a year or two, while we were young. And then, after another fortnight of such thoughtless happiness, as I suppose we shall never have again, we found ourselves back at the hotel in Derby, where we had stopped after our first day's journey, and

where we had directed letters to be sent to meet us. I had nothing, but he found a telegram, to summon him to go at once to his mother, who had been taken ill, in some far-away place in the north of Scotland, where it seems she has a house. The telegram was several days old when it reached us, and we settled, with how much pain I shall not try to tell you, Kitty, that he must start for the North to-night, leaving me to return to this house alone. It was a hasty, miserable parting, for he was full of remorse about his mother, with whom he had had some little quarrel before she set out for Scotland, and to whom he had not written since 'our day.' I can understand *that*, Kitty, for I know how hard I find it to write to you. As for me, well I have got over the parting, and perhaps the first letter will bring me the best of news, for he promised, just at parting, that as soon as his mother was well enough to bear the news—yes, he said that, Kitty, at the last minute, and what a stab the sentence was to my pride—as soon as she was able to bear the news, he would tell her about me, and set me free from my promise of secrecy. Good-night, Kitty, I am going to read your letters through carefully now, and answer your questions as far as I can. If you wonder at the vague information I give you, and grow anxious, and rush over here to find out for yourself what has changed me, it will not be my fault. He will not expect me to conceal anything from you, when you are sitting close to me and looking in my face. Before you can come I shall have heard from him, and he will have told me what to do. I will not let even my wishes be disobedient to my husband till then, for I know he will take the one cloud out of my sky as soon as he can. Ah! but there will always be its shadow left, for in my heart and conscience I know that it can never, after this concealment, be quite the same between you and me, Kitty, as it was before. There can never be the same clear open page of life between us, where no secret had ever been written; we shall never sit hand in hand together in this room as we used to do, feeling our hearts one. But I must not begin to think of this on my first solitary evening here, or it will be all over with me. I will turn to my letters. Good-night again. I shall make you kiss me when you have read this

sentence, whether you quite love me as you used to do or not."

But Christabel was not destined to read Katherine's letters through that night; she had hardly reached the end of the first page, when an interruption came that gave her other things to think of than even Katherine's letters.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"NOTHING CAN TOUCH HIM FARTHER."

Does the road wind uphill all the way?

Yes, to the very end.

Will the day's journey take the whole long day?

From morn to night, my friend.

But is there for the night a resting-place?

A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.

May not the darkness hide it from my face?

You cannot miss that inn.

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?

Those who have gone before.

Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?

They will not keep you standing at that door.

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?

Of labour you shall find the sum.

Will there be beds for me and all who seek?

Yea, beds for all who come.

MILDIE found, as might have been expected, that a large slice of the afternoon had been consumed in her visit to "Air Throne," and that an accumulation of neglected duties awaited her downstairs. Sidney and the Gentle Lamb had broken the handle off the drawing-room door while constructing an ingenious system of telegraph wires on the staircase, and when Mildie had, by great exertion, secured an entrance to his own room for Dr. Urquhart, she discovered that her mother's cup of cocoa, which she ought to have had at five o'clock, was still standing on a slab in the hall. Remembering the importance Dr. Urquhart attached to her mother's taking some refreshment in the afternoon, she seized the cold mess and rushed into the dining-room, determined to force her

mother to swallow a mouthful or two, whether she were inclined for it, in its present state or not. She felt very remorseful when she saw that Mrs. West had already taken her weary stand at the window and was looking down the street with that sad look of frightened expectation in her eyes that had been deepening there ever since Emmie went away.

"Dear mamma," Mildie said a little crossly, because she felt more pitiful than she could well bear, "I do wish you would ring for your cocoa when you want it. Dr. Urquhart said you were to have it regularly, and there might be some chance of your getting it before it is quite cold, if you would only remember it yourself. Mary Ann and I can't be everywhere at once, and think of everything."

Mrs. West submitted meekly to be scolded by her youngest daughter, as she did to everything else that came in her way.

"My dear," she said, returning the cup, after swallowing a third of its contents with great effort, but with no complaint, "my dear, you know that in the best of times Mary Ann never liked the dining-room bell to be rung in the afternoons, and since I can do so little for anyone, I don't wish to be a burden. I was reading over Emmie's letters to pass the time, and hoping that it was not much after five o'clock, and that I need not begin to wonder yet, why your father and Harry did not come home."

"I'm sure," said Mildie, vindictively, "they come quite soon enough for any good or use their society is to us. No, I don't mean to complain of Harry, though he has chosen to be glum ever since Christabel Moore left the house; I was thinking of you, mother dear. I am sure you hear grumbling enough of an evening after papa comes in; I can't understand why you want to begin sooner."

"Oh, Mildie dear, your father!"

"Yes, I know he is my father, but that does not make it any better for you," persisted Mildie. "I do think, when he has been out all day, he might have the sense not to talk you to death about miserable things when he comes back at night. Why should he scold

you if things are going wrong at the office? How can you help it?"

Mrs. West smiled at the word "scold."

"I almost wish it was me instead of himself he scolded," she said sadly; "if you knew, dear, how he is always blaming himself because he has not been able to do well for us, you would be more sorry for him. It is his love for us that makes him miserable, and that has perhaps pushed him on to some of the mistakes he repents so bitterly now, dear. We cannot be too patient with him."

"You are patient," cried Mildie, with a great impatient sob; and then she stood silent, while rebellious thoughts, such as come to young eager minds when the sad side of life is too persistently thrust upon them by their elders, swelled within her. Patient, indeed! Why should the whole world be clothed in sackcloth for them, just because their father had failed to keep the place in the world he had been born to? Could he not make one moan for it and have done, and let them all sink contentedly to some new sphere and wash their hands, once for all, of all old pretensions and traditions that Mildie for her part despised? Was it, after all, such a great thing to be wealthy, that, failing in that aim, there should be no place for you and yours to hide their heads in? Looking down into her heart, Mildie could not find the deep sympathy for her father's persistent misery she knew ought to be there.

"I believe I am a bad-tempered, hard creature," she said at last; "and there is no good in my talking to you, mamma, for I can't say anything you will like to hear. I will go and make tea for the boys, and bring you a cup to make up for the cold chocolate, if papa will only stay away long enough to give you time to drink it in peace."

"There's Harry!" exclaimed Mrs. West, who had turned to the window again, during Mildie's fit of silence, "coming home without his father."

"But he looks quite jolly," said Mildie; "he is nodding to us while he scrapes his feet. I'll run and let him in."

Though not given to bestow much attention on what

went on around her, Mildred had received a vague impression during the last few weeks that some fresh cause of anxiety had arisen, connected with her father, which lay at the bottom of her mother's new fidget, as she called it, to have him safe at home before dark. The impression was deepened now, by the first look exchanged between her mother and Harry when he entered the room. She read in it a whole volume of secret fears that perhaps had never found words on either side, and her curiosity and anxiety were fully aroused at last.

"All right, mother," Harry said, cheerfully, in spite of that first involuntary look. "He'll follow me in twenty minutes, or half an hour at latest. This time it's only that Cummins sent for him into his private room, about a letter that he had neglected to post. Yes," in a lower tone, "I could not help it; it would not have done for me to wait about for him while the other fellows were watching. He's sure to come straight home to-night, after the pulling up he'll have got from Cummins."

"Poor papa!" said Mrs. West, sighing. "Well, you'll come back after you have had your tea in the schoolroom; your father 'll be very low to-night, I'm afraid, but you'll come back and stay for the rest of the evening with me."

"All right," said Harry again, with just a shade of disappointment crossing his face.

"Make a good meal first, my boy. It is pleasanter for you there than here, I know," said Mrs. West, sighing, "and that is why I like you to take your meals with the younger ones, where you can talk as much as you like. I know it's sad and dull for you here."

"Oh, never fear for me," said Harry, brightly, "I shall do well enough, and as for eating, I am a whale to eat anything that comes to hand anywhere. I only wish you and my father were likely to eat a tenth part of what I'm going in for just now."

He stooped to kiss his mother, and Mildie, whose conscience smote her with fear lest this "anything" he spoke about so glibly should not be forthcoming, rushed off to the schoolroom to ascertain that the boys had not drunk up all the milk and made deserts of the bread-and-butter plates, while she had been keeping them waiting

for supper. For once fate, in the shape of an organ-man with a troop of performing canaries, had favoured her, by drawing the depredators out upon the leads; and when she had made tea in peace, and taken the promised cup to her mother, she sidled up to Harry, hoping to draw him into a little confidential talk before the boys came down. He had not brought as courageous a face into the schoolroom as he had shown to his mother, or something had happened since to depress his spirits. Mildie found him with his arms crossed on the mantelshef, and his head laid down upon them, in a strangely disconsolate attitude for him. She had of late been daily growing in respect for her old tyrant, and would have surprised and even disgusted him a good deal if she had ventured to tell him her thoughts about the part he had been acting since this new stress of trouble set in. "Hero, indeed, stuff and nonsense; as if anyone could help doing for his father and mother what he did! It just had to be done, and there was nothing to talk about." This new-born respect restrained her from roughly interrupting his reverie now, and she stood silently looking at the section of forehead and cheek visible above his arms, thinking there was a good deal of change here too, since Emmie went away. At last he raised his head and said abruptly:

"So she has come back, has she? You've seen her, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Mildie, disappointed that the conversation had taken that direction, "yes, I saw her, but she did not tell me anything. I took her some tea, and she sent me away directly afterwards."

"I shall have to carry her box upstairs, at all events; there's no one but me to do it. How does she look?"

"Oh, I don't know," answered Mildie. "I wish you would not worry about Christabel Moore when there's so much else to think about. *She* looks well enough. She can go away for a month and enjoy herself, and think nothing of us all the while."

"And why should she not?" cried Harry fiercely. "We're not such pleasant people, as far as I know, for anyone to want to take thoughts of us away with

them on a holiday. We might as well let her enjoy herself without complaining."

"I did not mean to complain," pleaded Mildie; "and at all events you can't see her now, for she is busy writing letters to Katherine. I wish you'd talk to me a little about other things; it's so seldom you and I are alone together; and I should like to know—it would be a relief to me, Harry—what papa does, when he's out by himself, that makes mother so anxious, and that has turned you so—so—crusty," concluded Mildie, resolved not to err on the side of flattery, whatever her thoughts might be. "Tell me, once for all, what it is we have to fear."

"Where's the use of your knowing? You may be satisfied that it is bad enough," said Harry, covering his face with another groan. "Where's the use of bringing misery nearer by talking of it? It will come fast enough, I can tell you."

"I should like to be prepared for it, to know what to do."

"You'll not have anything to do in it. How should a girl like you?"

All Mildie's combativeness would have been roused by this speech three months ago, but she was learning womanly wisdom fast.

"I know I never am of much use," she said; "I'm too unlucky. But if you would trust me——"

"It is not that I don't trust you," groaned Harry; "I should be glad enough to have someone to talk to, now Emmie is away, only I hate a long yarn; and one does not know how to speak when it's one's own father, and one is so sorry for him, and knows that he has been badgered and tempted into it all. Stay, look here, you're quite old enough to take a hint," and to Mildie's surprise Harry stretched his hand to the book-case, drew out an old illustrated copy of "Master Humphrey's Clock," and opened it at the picture which shows little Nell seated in a corner of the inn kitchen, and watching, with startled sorrowful eyes, her old grandfather playing a game at cards in company with three sharpers, who exchange glances of satis-

faction, as they note the imbecile expression of face with which he is choosing the card he is about to throw down.

"Can you remember," said Harry, with something like a sob in his voice, "the old times when we were small, and he used to tell us stories from these pictures after dinner, sitting on his knee by turns? Emmie used always to be frightened and cover her eyes when we came to this one."

"I recollect the dessert, and mamma's pretty evening dresses, and the ornaments she let me play with, but I was too young then for the stories," answered Mildie.

"But you have read this book; you can guess what I want to tell you; you know why little Nell had to take her grandfather away from Mrs. Jallop's?"

"Because he gambled, and she was afraid he might be tempted to take Mrs. Jallop's money. So that is what you're afraid of? I did not know it was so bad as that," she added, turning again towards the picture, and looking with disgust at the cunning, foolish face of the poor old man. "I don't wonder that Emmie hated this picture."

Harry took the book from her hastily and thrust it back into its place.

"I don't hate it," he said slowly, after a minute's pause. "I think pretty often of it, and of the story as father used to tell it to Emmie and me. It comes back to me as he told it, and somehow seems to explain things. Poor father, he had not any notion then of what he would come to. It was all plain sailing with him then. He thought he'd come into life at the right end, at the top of the tree, and that it was his chief business to keep there, and to put us there. He's never been able to feel right anywhere else, and since he came down, he's always been looking, first in one way and then in another, for the stroke of good luck that was to put him back again, till at last—well," said Harry, putting his finger to his forehead, "I suppose one can't go on expecting impossibilities and being disappointed every day of one's life, without it's telling on one's brain in the end, and when it comes to that, one's not responsible. Making money is a sort of

mania with him now, since he took to haunting places of an evening where he can bet and play for money."

"Where does he get the money to play with?"

"Ah, that's it!" said Harry. "I think he has borrowed a good deal lately from Uncle Rivers, and other old acquaintances, who used to pity and respect him till now, when he's taken to begging, poor father,—he who used to be so proud—but they are not likely to go on supplying him long. Cheques and notes pass through his hands sometimes at the office, and Cummins has such a spite against him, and is so tired out with his muddling and mistakes, that I believe he'd rather catch him out once in a fault of that kind, and make a show of magnanimity to a fallen man by merely dismissing him, than put up with him in the office much longer."

"And Mr. Cummins sent for father to-day as you were leaving. Oh, Harry, and you said 'all right' when you went in to mamma!"

"It's more likely than not to be one of the everyday rowings, and one must keep up one's spirits as long as one can."

Mildie put her hand on Harry's shoulder and said, half under her breath: "You've got to bear the anxiety all by yourself; it's very good of you."

"Nonsense!" cried Harry; but a quiver passed over his face, and he did not shake off Mildie's hand. They stood a moment together in silence, and then Mildie asked, in a subdued, awe-struck voice:

"You don't think father ever will do *that*—about the cheques?"

"Not if he quite knows what he is doing; but when people get muddled by thinking night and day just of that one thing, winning money, and when temptation is constantly put in their way on purpose—but, no, what I am really afraid of, is appearances turning against him accidentally, and Cummins, who has, I know, been looking out for a chance of getting rid of him, taking advantage of this habit to put him in the wrong."

"I almost wish it would come," said Mildie, "the worst that has to come, and that it was well over. If we go with a great crash quite down to the ground, we shall get up again, like Antæus, you know."

"No, I don't," said Harry; "never heard of the beggar. Let him slide; what has he to do with us?"

"Ah well!" said Mildie; "what I mean is, that I should like to make a fresh start, washing our hands of this big gloomy house, and the pictures of rich old Aldermen Wests on the walls, and the pretence of late dinners, and the calling ourselves ladies and gentlemen. I should like to begin again at the bottom and see what we could do. We would all work. Yes, you may laugh at me, but I could, Harry, I could black grates, and scrub and drudge, if I'm fit for nothing else, for I have been doing it lately, though nobody has known anything about it."

"I have," answered Harry, putting his arm round Mildie's waist, and taking away her breath by actually kissing her on the forehead. "You're a brave girl, Mildie, I'll say that for you, though you are a bit of a pedant, and I've noticed, if no one else has, how pluckily you've put your shoulder to the wheel lately. You'll show yourself a regular brick, I'll answer for that, when the worst comes."

"I wish it were come, then," said Mildie, glowing under this immense praise. "With you to help me, Harry, I should not mind anything."

"But we don't know what the worst will be yet," groaned Harry. "You're a brick, as I observed before" (stooping down and kissing her again), "you and I can stand up against whatever happens; but there's the others to think for—my mother, and Emmie, and the poor old governor. I don't know how he'd bear another fall, or where it would take him to. There, you'd better pour out the tea. Is not that the kitchen clock striking seven? I'll get my tea, and if he has not turned up by that time, I'll stroll out again to see if I can hear anything of him, at any of his usual places. It will be better than sitting still, anyhow."

The meal was over before any interruption came, and Mildie followed Harry out into the hall for the sake of hovering about him while he took his hat and looked into the drawing-room to say a few cheering words to his mother, before he left the house.

"You might bring Christabel Moore down to sit with mother while I'm away," he suggested wistfully, when he had reached the hall door. While Mildie was searching her mind for some inoffensive way of insinuating that his panacea of comfort did not equally suit their mother, a new direction was given to her thoughts, by some sounds outside the house that seemed to fill her ears, and arrest the beating of her pulses, as no sound, no ear-piercing shriek or wail of woe, had ever done before. Yet they were the merest everyday sounds, footsteps approaching and pausing before the house, and rapid wheels stopping suddenly at their door.

"Dr. Urquhart coming back," observed Harry, who had heard, and strangely enough turned pale at these common occurrences too.

"It's not Dr. Urquhart," said Mildie, in a whisper.

"There!" cried Harry, pushing her towards the dining-room door. "Go in there to mother, and keep her from looking out of the window, whatever you do, while I see what it is. Do go at once."

But the precaution was a second too late. Mrs. West had resumed her watch at the window the instant Harry left her, and, while he was speaking, the dining-room door opened, and she came out with a marble face, and an expression in her eyes that Mildie never forgot.

"Open the door, Harry dear," she said. "It's—it's—your father; they are bringing him home—ill—I think. Quick, dears—let me pass. I'll go myself; he must not be kept waiting—I must get to him quick."

Mildie, in wild terror at her looks, threw her arms about her to keep her back, and Harry went to the door and opened it wide. At the bottom of the steps there was a little procession, two or three men carrying a heavy something which seemed lately to have been lifted out of a cab that was drawn up near. At the top stood Mr. Cummins, white and agitated, and in a hurry to speak. He seized Harry's arm to keep him from running down the steps, and forced him back into the house.

"Keep your mother and sister out of the way for Heaven's sake," he whispered. "Take them somewhere before *that* comes into the house. I hurried

on here to prepare—to explain—to save you the first shock, if I could. Get your mother out of the way, at least."

"What is it?" asked Harry, hoarsely.

"A fit. There *may* be life left; we don't know. I sent for a doctor and he is there, with the—with your father, bringing him in. It all happened in a minute. He had got up to leave the room, and just as he reached the door, he fell down as if he had been shot. I had been speaking to him quite quietly."

"Yes; I daresay," said Harry, between his teeth. "Let go my arm, if you please." Then, as Mr. Cummins tightened, rather than loosened, his grasp, horrified at the 'deep unspoken condemnation which those stern young eyes burned down into his very soul, Harry threw him off, sending him staggering forward into the hall, and rushed down the steps to meet the slowly-mounting procession. Four men carrying a limp recumbent figure between them.

"You had better go back, you had better not come near just yet," a kind, professional voice said in his ear.

But Harry did not heed the words; he only saw a poor, worn, iron-grey head and a white face swaying wretchedly backwards and forwards, and he pushed the figure nearest it away, and took it on his own shoulder. The white forehead touched his cheek as he bent down, and the half-closed eyes seemed to look cloudily, but with a strange, still, dignified calmness into his. He had never felt a chill like the chill of that touch, never seen that film in any eyes before, but he knew by instinct what it meant, and, strange to say, the feeling that first rushed into his mind was not grief so much as a sad, solemn triumph. Out of the reach of human scorn at least, snatched away from the trouble that was too strong for him.

The fever called living is conquered at last.

A thought something like this rose in Harry's mind, calming the anger which the sight of Mr. Cummins had excited, lifting him for a little while above the sting of grief and the pangs of pity. His mother's face, as white almost as the face on his shoulder, met his eyes the

instant he had lifted his burden over the threshold, but her agonised look did not overcome his courage, for he had a word of comfort ready.

"He is safe, mother," he said, gently. "Look at him; he has got away from it all. Let us carry him upstairs to rest."

Yes, he has escaped from the long, long struggle, the frantic grasp after shadows which he sees now had no substance behind them; escaped, indeed, but with empty hands, with nothing to show for his gift of life, no thankfulness even, only long, long years of disquieting himself in vain; dust and ashes of regret stored in his soul, for possessions whose worthlessness he recognises now—clearly enough—now that he has got away from the misleading glare that had bewildered his vision, into the daylight of God's countenance at last.

Dr. Urquhart returned home in the midst of the sad confusion, and quietly took upon himself the necessary arrangements, while Christabel carried off the two boys to "Air Throne," and devoted herself to keeping them out of the way of the elder mourners. It was Dr. Urquhart, who, quite late at night, raised the question, which no one had thought of till then, of how the news of her father's sudden death was to be conveyed to Emmie. No one liked the thought of her receiving it by letter so far from home, with no possibility open to her of returning at once to those whose grief she would long to alleviate. When at last Mrs. West had been persuaded to go to bed, Mildie, Harry, and Dr. Urquhart met in a sad little conclave in the back sitting-room to consult what should be done.

"If I could but be spared to run down to the south of France myself, and bring her back in time for the funeral," said Dr. Urquhart, with a sudden light on his face, which somehow jarred on Mildie's over-strung nerves terribly. "If I could go, I could perhaps break the news to her better than anyone else, having been on the spot, I mean. It would of course be a great shock. She would bear the tidings best from someone who came direct from home. Don't you think so?" he added, turning for counsel to Mildie, in the anxiety which, on

This one matter, was strong enough to make him distrust his own judgment.

Miserable as she was, Mildie had time for a recollection of passages in Emmie's letters which caused her to feel a little contemptuously towards Dr. Urquhart's certainty that he could comfort her sister.

"It would not be at all a good plan," she pronounced, steadily. "Mamma will want you here; and besides, you could not take Emmie away from Aunt Rivers, unless someone went out with you to fill her place. Uncle Rivers is the proper person to bring Emmie back to us, and Alma must go out with him, and take care of her own mother. Mamma will ask for Emmie as soon as she begins to care for anything that is left."

"Of course," replied Dr. Urquhart. "Your sister's return is the only thing to cheer her at all."

"And Uncle Rivers must bring her," persisted Mildie. "We ought perhaps to have sent to him and Alma at once, but there would have been no use, we should not have found them at home. I daresay they are coming back from some grand party at the Kirkmans or the Forrests just now."

It was decided, before the council broke up, that Dr. Urquhart should call at Eccleston Square early on the next morning to acquaint Sir Francis with the state of affairs in Saville Street. If no more time were lost, Dr. Urquhart thought it possible he might make the journey to La Roquette, and return in time to attend the funeral.

"A token of respect which he would, no doubt," Dr. Urquhart said, "be anxious to pay to his brother-in-law and the family."

"As if that could do *him* or us any good," Mildie said in a low voice, as she turned away to go back to her mother. "As if we any of us wanted pretences now."

Mildie was to sleep with her mother in Mrs. Urquhart's room to-night. But before she began to undress, she went into that other room which had changed its character so strangely since morning, from a commonplace bedroom to a stately presence-chamber. It was

empty when Mildie entered, except for the still form that lay on the bed, its features sharpened already, showing under the white sheet that covered it. Mildie did not put back the folds or look at the face; alas, of late years it had not been a lovable or loving sight to her. A great cloud of something had veiled all its fatherliness from her, more thickly than the white sheet shrouded the irresponsive features now, and to bring back the father she could honestly weep for, she must look back a long way.

She knelt by the bed, and covering her face with her hands, searched her memory for old, old recollections that could wake up the filial regrets she hated herself for not experiencing more vividly. That time when, a very little thing, she had fallen down on the stairs, and her father had picked her up tenderly, and carried her to the nursery; and that summer vacation, when they had all gone into the country together, before their misfortunes began, and he had been very good to them all. Mildie was sure she could quite recollect a ride on his shoulder, and that she had helped to bury him in a sand mausoleum on the shore. On one of her birthdays he had called her to him and kissed her quite of his own accord, and he had praised her diligence only the other day when, coming by chance into the schoolroom, he had found her absorbed in a German book. Yes, yes; there was this time and that, little sparklets of gold, gems of love and kindness, showing among all that blank darkness, to be remembered for ever, to live on in memory now that an end had come to all else, now that no opportunity could come for another such word, for another claim on a daughter's love to be made by him who lay there, her father, the only earthly father she could ever have, though this was all she knew of him.

Mildie bowed her head and thanked God for the little store she had culled, the precious store, the few words, and looks, and thoughts her father had been able to spare to his child, from that daily and nightly absorption in sordid cares, which the world had exacted of him, and repaid him for yielding it, by emptying his life of all true life, and breaking his heart at last.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A CONFERENCE.

He either fears his fate too much,
Or his desert is small,
Who dares not put it to the touch,
To win or lose it all.

"WELL, Horace, my boy, where's the use of going on arguing? I suppose it never happened yet that a young man's mother has exactly the same opinion of the girl he is going to marry as he has himself, more especially when the young man is an only son, and the mother, poor soul, has been all her life in the way of thinking nothing good enough for his having. I'm not going to quarrel with you for not being as exacting of what is due to you as I am. No, nor yet for disliking to take up the cudgels on my account, when I'm tempted to think that the girl who professes to love you might make a little more of your mother. I say nothing about that."

"I am sorry enough you should have occasion to complain, mother," answered Horace, gloomily. "You can't think it pleases me to see you overlooked; but as to what you say about professing to love me—don't let us make *her* out a hypocrite, there's not been so much profession of the kind that we need talk about it."

"The more shame for her then, I say," cried Mrs. Kirkman, fanning herself vigorously; "there it is where I do lose patience. Open the window a crack, will you, Horace, for I feel suffocating. It's either that the weather is unnaturally hot for April—or else—I am getting stouter and stouter till it'll be a mercy if your Miss Rivers don't send me off in an apoplectic fit some fine morning, with her shilly-shally and her vagaries. No, I'm not going to call her names; 'hussy' was on my lips, but I know it don't become me to say it, or you to hear, but I've a right to speak my thoughts out to my own son, and I *will* say that it's a shame for her to have as good as promised to marry you at the end of the season, which ain't far off now, if she don't love you as you deserve to be loved, my boy."

"A man deserves in that way what he can get, I

suppose, mother," said Horace, a little proudly and sadly; "and if he chooses to give *all* for nothing, it's his own look-out, I believe; no one can mend the matter to him by talking about it."

"My poor boy!" said Mrs. Kirkman, putting down her fan to pat her son's broad, brown hand, which hung over the back of her chair, against which he had been leaning during a long conversation, started by the arrival of a little twisted note from Alma Rivers; which little note, at the end of half an hour, lay open on the table before them, still unanswered.

"My poor boy!"

"You need not pity me, mother," Horace answered, in a pained, sulky tone. "I hate pity! Let me manage my own affairs without your interference or my father's, and they'll come right enough, I daresay. She and I understand each other. I don't go in for sentiment myself to the extent that some people do, and if she likes to make the most of her time of keeping me in suspense, it's what every woman enjoys, I am told. It will end as we wish, provided my father and you consent to let her alone, and don't put up her pride by perpetually requiring her to tack herself on to us wherever we choose to take her."

"But that's just what your father does expect, and I warn you he won't bear any contradiction about it. He ain't what some people calls sensitive; he has put up with a good deal in his time, but now he feels he has got beyond all that, and other people should begin to put up with whims of his, if he chooses to start 'em. It's his whim just now to make a figure in society, and in picking a wife for you he has chosen a girl he thought likely to help him. He has not stood out for money to match what he can give you, nor yet for rank—though he believes you could have had that for the asking. He does not care to put you and your wife at the top of the tree, and for him and me to be looked down upon by your wife's people; his thought was to connect ourselves with a family that had risen, but who had gone in for reputation and making their way into society, while he ground on at the money-making till he'd got it up to the mark he had set before himself. The Riverses seemed

to have hit his thoughts exactly. They manage to be well received everywhere, and yet we know enough of their beginnings to feel quite at ease with them. I've had it in my mind scores of times, when Lady Rivers has been talking to me about 'my lady this,' and 'the countess that,' and her court dresses, and her confidential maid, to put her in mind of a day when I dropped in at her old home in Darlington, and caught her and her sister with fingers the colour of a mallow, dyeing their last year's ribbons to retrim their hats for assize week, when Frank Rivers and his friend Mr. West were expected down from London. I let her talk as if we'd neither of us done a hand's-turn of useful work in our lives, but I'm ready to laugh in her face all the while, and the recollection don't dispose me to encourage Miss Alma in giving herself the airs of a duchess, before your father and me. If she'd shown the same pride when we first knew her, as she's treated us to lately, you'd never have had leave to make up to her, I can tell you, Horace."

"I might have done it all the same, mother; you and my father seem to have taken it into your heads that I have likings to order, but you are wrong there. I did not fall in love with Miss Rivers to further my father's plans, I can assure you, and I can't and shan't change my feelings towards her because he's not satisfied with the bargain he thought he'd made. You had better let him know as much."

"Nay, nay! it has not come to anything of the kind yet," said Mrs. Kirkman soothingly. "I only meant to put you on your mettle, so to speak, that you may let the young lady see you are not to be trifled with. It's all very well to talk about feelings, and I respect you for having 'em, my boy, but all the same we can't shut our eyes to it, that they are not the first things exactly to be thought of in this case. Where would you be if your father turned crusty, and sent you to Miss Rivers with nothing but your feelings to speak to her about? Not even in as good a position as your father was when he came for me long ago, for you've not been brought up to work as he was; and though I don't think little of you, as you know, my boy, I don't take you to be such a man as your father."

"And whose fault is it, mother, that I have never been allowed to work? I'm always being twitted with my idleness, and the contrast with my father, but what opportunity have I had of doing as he did? He prides himself on having crowded the business of a dozen lives into one, and of leaving nothing for me to do. He surely need not reproach me for being what he has worked so hard to make me! How does he know that I should not have liked work and independence better than the life he thrusts upon me? I can tell you I am often sick enough of it. I don't need you to tell me what a poor figure I cut, or how little chance there is of Miss Rivers taking me, except for my father's money."

"Tush! tush! Your father made the money with toil enough, and plenty of enemies alongside of it to grudge and carp at some of his plans in getting it together. All he asks of you is to spend it creditably and please yourself, with a thought to his pleasure and credit too, which don't seem to me a very hard bargain. Come, come, Horace, don't let us get into the dolefuls for next to nothing."

"It is something to me, however, if my father expects me to quarrel with Miss Rivers, after all he's done to bring us together."

"It's to prevent a quarrel, not to make one, that I advise you to show some spirit to-day. So long as a woman fancies she can twist her lover round her finger she never knows the hold he has on her heart. Let Miss Alma see that there is something you insist upon, above pleasing her whims, and she'll soon come to her senses, and think more of you than she has ever done yet. I know women, if even, as I see you are thinking by your obstinate face, Horace, my dear, I am not equal to understanding your sweetheart. It don't alter human nature, that ever I've heard, to be able to speak a dozen foreign languages and play on the piano, no, nor to have worn kid gloves and led a useless life ever since you was born; you're a woman when all's said and done, and you can't bring yourself to think much of a man who is soft enough to knock under to you at every turn. You may take my word for that."

"I don't doubt the wisdom of your advice, so far as it goes," said Horace slowly. And then he rose from his leaning posture over his mother's chair, and, strolling to the window, stood with his arms folded, looking out. He wished with all his soul that he could take his mother's view of the case, and credit Alma with so much genuine regard for him that an assumption of loving authority on his part would awaken a response of womanly tenderness on hers. He tried to imagine a lover's quarrel between them, which should be, as his Eton Latin Grammar had taught him, "the renewing of love." *Renewing!* Had there ever been a beginning of love on her side? Could he, looking back on all the variations of manner that so engrossed him—kind, coquettish, fascinating, indifferent—fix on a single look or word in all their intercourse that had quite satisfied him, at the time, as evidence of the feeling he was always looking for, and never exactly finding? He did not expect or wish for sentiment, as he often reminded himself, but a certain genuine preference he did feel to be necessary. He could not quite reconcile himself to the thought of being taken simply for what he had to give, however satisfactory such homage to the magnitude of their possessions might be to his father. He wanted something for himself, some sort of recognition, and he thought, as he stood taking stock, as it were, of his own love and the strength of his own feelings towards Alma, that there was that in him which gave him a right to demand it. Perhaps his mother was right, and he had damaged himself by yielding to Alma's caprice. He ought to have resented the slights she had put upon his mother—that fond good mother, whose oddities and vulgarities he, in his better moments, hated himself for despising in his worst.

"Well," he said, coming back to his mother's chair when he had worked off part of his irritation by pulling a heavy blind-tassel to pieces. "Well, what is it you want me to do about this note of Alma's? She apologises to you for throwing over her engagement to go with us to Hurlingham on Thursday week, but she makes no allusion to my disappointment. Would you have me

remonstrate when I see her to-night at Lady Forrest's ball?"

"For which you've never had a proper invitation, let me remind you; only a verbal intimation from Alma that you may go if you like, and no word about your father or me."

"That is not her fault, and if the Forrests choose to keep to their own set, we can do without them; it is nothing to us."

"It will be something to you, Horace, when you've married, if your wife gets carried by her sister into a set where you are looked down upon. You said yourself that you got shoved up into a corner and hardly had a word with Alma the whole evening, the last time you were at Lady Forrest's. I would not put myself in the way of being so slighted before my future wife's very eyes, if I were you. Let Alma miss you to-night, and write her a letter to bring her to her senses about Thursday. Tell her your father will be seriously offended if she breaks her engagement. He's invited a large party on the strength of her promise, swells whom he don't trust me to entertain without someone who understands them to back me up. No, I don't want you to put it exactly in that way, Horace. I daresay I should if I were to write, for I never can get anything said but what I mean when I put pen to paper, but you've had education enough to fit you to tell white lies in a letter. You'd better begin at once, for I'm going out soon, and I want you to come with me to Gunter's to order the luncheon for Thursday. You young men understand good eating nowadays, and are twice as critical as we old housekeepers."

"Very well, mother, I'll write here. You had better give me half an hour," glancing at the writing-table with a look of disgust, as if it were an instrument of torture to which he was about to deliver himself up for that space of time.

"That's right," said Mrs. Kirkman, encouragingly; "I'll leave you alone. One does a thing of that kind easier when one's alone, and can pull all the faces over it one feels inclined to. I'll go and ask your father if he's any suggestions to make about the lunch-basket on

Thursday. He wants it to be something very special, quite regardless of—but there, I beg your pardon, Horry, I know that's one of the phrases you don't like to hear from my lips so often, though why, when one is spending one's money freely, and has been looking forward to nothing else all one's life, one should be afraid to talk about it, is more than I shall ever understand."

Horace's Eton education, though it did him good service in a thousand ways that had not entered into his father's calculation of the uses of learning, had failed to raise him as far above letter-writing difficulties as his mother supposed; and, but for a certain dogged resoluteness of nature that forbade him to fail in accomplishing a given task in a given time, the end of the half-hour would have found him with nothing to show for his application.

"My dear Alma," he wrote, and then he sat staring at the words and biting the end of a pen viciously for fully twenty-five minutes. It chanced that he had never written a note to Alma since their semi-engagement. He was not fond of writing, and he had hitherto never allowed a single day to pass without managing a meeting, and the exchange of a few bright, gossipy words somewhere; and now the combined thoughts that he was about to write to her, and that he should not see her for twenty-four hours, filled his mind blankly and hindered his progress. What sort of a look would there be on her face, he kept asking himself, when he came for an answer to this letter of remonstrance? Judging her obstinacy by his own, he thought he would avoid being hard upon it. He would make the yielding as easy as possible. He would write such a note as should need no answer but the gracious, good-humoured consent to his request, which she would surely not refuse when he came taking it for granted. He would show his resolution by letter, and in her sweet presence reward her yielding by steadily ignoring that there had ever been any contest of wills between them.

He was pleasing himself with this thought when he heard his mother's steps reascending the stairs to her boudoir, and pushing away his first sheet, where he had scrawled Alma's name a dozen times, he seized another

and wrote rapidly, knitting his brows and setting his teeth with the same sort of resolution he would have called up to take a desperate leap, or face a perilous crag in mountain climbing.

'MY DEAR ALMA,

"I have been much astonished and hurt at the contents of the note my mother received from you this morning. I take it for granted that you had not, when making the engagement you speak of as likely to prevent you from keeping your promise to my father and mother for Thursday week, taken into consideration all the inconvenience and annoyance your withdrawal from the party arranged for you would occasion them, and I therefore scribble off a hasty line to entreat you to reconsider your plans. I say nothing about my own disappointment at losing the long day in your company I am looking forward to, severe as this would be; the chief point with me this morning is to be assured that you did not intentionally prefer other friends to my father and mother and myself. I don't want to be exacting as to your time or attention, but I think, dearest Alma, that I have a right to take it for granted that you do feel something more to be due to them and me than other, if even older, friends can claim from you. What does the promise you made to me three months ago mean but this? I have been very patient, but when feelings are so strong as mine, there is a limit to patience. I shall not expect an answer to this letter, but shall hope to find you ready to join the party for Hurlingham when I call for you."

The last three sentences were written with a dash, the pen-point driving into the thick creamy paper with an energy meant to assure himself that his hand was not trembling at all, and that he did not feel as if any great stake for him hung on the mood in which those words would be read by-and-by. Then he sighed and folded the sheet without reading it over, and came forward to meet his mother, wearing the most nonchalant air he could put on.

"You'd better let me post your letter to Miss

Rivers," said Mrs. Kirkman, a little doubtful of this ostentatious display of resolution. "Your father has actually been talking to me about her, just as if he'd guessed what there was in that twisted note. There never was such a thing yet done as to get on his blind side. He sees further through a deal board than anyone I ever came across, and he ain't at all satisfied with the way your engagement is going on. I hope you've put it strongly to Alma about behaving herself on Thursday, for if she don't you'll have all the fat in the fire, I can tell you."

"The what, mother?" asked Horace, gloomily.

"I've said it," answered Mrs. Kirkman. "And dear me, Horry, I take pains enough when I'm in company to keep back the expressions that come natural to me; if I may not say what I like, as I like, when I'm alone with you, my life won't be worth having. I often think how glad I should be to awake some morning and find myself in our old house at Darlington, with your father a clerk at the ironworks again, and friends about us with whom I need not be on my P's and Q's. If you're not to be happy—if you don't get what you want—I shall begin to wonder what we ever made all this fuss about, for it don't seem to be doing any of us much good." Mrs. Kirkman's broad red face actually wrinkled up piteously as she finished her sentence, and tears filled her eyes and began to overflow slowly. It was such an unusual sight that, shaken for the moment out of his usual crust, Horace stooped down and kissed her affectionately.

"Never mind, old mother, we'll make it out somehow," he said. "But you'd better leave me to post the letter to Miss Rivers. I should not like to have it taken out of my hands in such a fashion as that."

He carried it about with him in his pocket all day, feeling a certain satisfaction and sense of safety in keeping it in his own power, and diminishing as far as was prudent the interval between Alma's receipt of the letter and his next interview with her, when he could do as he liked about making concessions. Wondering, too, in his vague way, that his first love-letter should be of such an uncomfortable character; and that he should care so extravagantly about it that when at last

he did drop it into a letter-box in time to reach Eccleston Square by the latest post, such an agony of anxiety seized him, that nothing but the certainty that no amount of bribery or entreaty would be of any use, prevented him from rushing into the post-office and demanding to have it returned.

CHAPTER XXV.

"RETREAT."

"Love seeketh not itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care,
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a heaven in hell's despair."

So sang a little clod of clay,
Trodden with the cattle's feet,
But a pebble of the brook
Warbled out these metres meet :

"Love seeketh only *self* to please,
To bind another to its delight,
Joys in another's loss of ease,
And builds a hell in heaven's despite."

THE note that had cost so much discussion, and been sent on its way with so many misgivings, reached Alma very early on the morning of the next day, on her return from a ball at Lady Forrest's, to which her father had accompanied her. They had gone into Sir Francis's study on entering the house, and while they were waiting for some tea, Sir Francis, as was his wont, began to peer about for any notes or newspapers that might have come in since he left the room a few hours before.

"May not the letters, if there are any, wait till breakfast-time? I'm sure we are too tired to care about them now," said Alma, languidly.

"Ah," cried Sir Francis, looking keenly at her, "you are tired, you did not enjoy yourself this evening. I don't generally notice such matters, but it struck me that something was wrong with you. How was it your indefatigable attendant was not in waiting to-night as usual? But (with a keen smile) I should not have thought *that* omission especially provocative of fatigue. Constance seemed merry enough, and, by-the-way, who

was that young fellow who danced with her so many times, and with whom her little ladyship giggled a good deal in her old style, I thought, at supper? One of the younger generation of Forrest cousins, who have taken her up in despite of the elders, I suppose, as she makes so much of him."

"Papa," cried Alma, "is it possible you did not know him? Do you not remember young Lawrence, Frank's great friend, who was so often with us at Shanklin, the winter we spent there before Frank went to India? Have you forgotten all about him?"

And Alma wondered, with a sore feeling of indignation swelling her heart, whether her father would take Wynyard Anstice for one of Horace Kirkman's relations, if he met him in her married home a year or so hence, forgetting all that had gone before. But no, Wynyard was not a person to be so easily forgotten.

"You certainly are not an observing person, papa," she added.

"My dear, I have other things to think about; but I do remember young Lawrence now you recall my thoughts to him. Your mother got into a great fright about him, and sent for me to come to Shanklin at a very inconvenient moment, I remember, to act bugbear and keep him out of the house. I don't think I saw him half-a-dozen times. Constance was supposed to have been smitten by his charms, was she not? But she was a mere child then, who ought not to have been thinking of anything but her blackboard and her 'Mangnall's Questions.' Perhaps I ought to be more observing. However, that is Sir John's business now, as far as silly little Conny is concerned. He's old enough to take care of his wife, one would think. How comes he to let an old lover of hers hang about the house and dance with her half the evening, before a score or so of critical Forrest relations? Do you suppose he knows anything about their past acquaintance?"

"Papa," cried Alma, astonished again, "you know very little about Constance if you think she can ever have found sufficient courage to tell such a tale to Sir John Forrest."

"I should have thought, however, that it required more courage, and a sort of courage I am sorry to credit

a child of mine with, to dance and giggle with a young fop like that before her husband's very eyes. If Constance is so timid, how comes she to risk offending her husband so outrageously?"

"She does not mean any harm, poor child, she is carried away by the excitement of the moment; and I think even you must know by this time, papa, that there is never much likelihood of Sir John's noticing particularly anything that takes place after dinner. He was asleep in a corner of the billiard-room nearly all this evening."

"Ah, I begin to feel sadly afraid your mamma made a mistake there, and that that marriage will turn out a bad business; but he is not always asleep?"

"Not quite always, and he is exacting and jealous enough when he is awake, but Constance can always humour and satisfy him when she pleases. One gets used to it," said Alma in a low, sad tone.

She was thinking of herself as well as of Constance, and feeling with a keen sense of self-degradation, how easy the descent was from daily false seeming, such as must inevitably come of living in false relations with the people about you, to actual false speaking and distinctly dishonest deeds. Was it a descent on which one could stop oneself? Her father first broke the silence into which they had fallen.

"Well, I had nothing to do with it. I really was too busy to see enough of what went on to be a fair judge, and your mother assured me that Constance was left perfectly free, and that she chose for herself."

"Yes, it was all put before her very strongly, and she thought herself that she should not like poverty. I suppose we none of us do; it is the one evil that can be put before one, the other evils are left out of sight."

"I wish your mother were well enough to come home. Her authority over Conny is sadly needed. It is most unlucky that she should be away this spring."

"It would make her miserable to bring her back to this," said Alma. "Papa, you will not blame me now, will you, when I shirk engagements with the Kirkmans, to keep close to Constance?"

"You are a good child," said Sir Francis, affection-

ately. “I will trust you to do what you think best. You have more sense than all the others put together ; and you, at all events, shall be left at liberty to act and judge for yourself.”

“Thank you, papa,” said Alma, drawing her head back to escape the kiss he would have given, “but it is a little late, is it not, to say that ? Here comes my tea—and letters.”

There were two, one was from La Roquette, and both were for Alma. As she took them up, Sir Francis asked the servant if anyone had inquired for him during the evening, or if any telegram had arrived.

“Did you expect one ?” Alma asked, when the servant had left the room.

“I am very glad to escape, I can tell you, for you have given me bad news enough for one evening ; but I confess I am anxious. I met an old friend of the Wests’ this evening, who gave me a hint to expect fresh trouble in Saville Street. He had heard a rumour that poor West had been carried home from his office in a fit or something of the kind to-day. I rather expected to find I had been sent for, but as there seems to be no message, we will hope, for the next six or seven hours at least, that his illness has been exaggerated. You have finished your tea, I see ; had we not better go to bed, and try to get as much sleep as circumstances admit of, to fit us for to-morrow’s budget of worries ?”

Alma took the hint, and carried her letters upstairs, but she did not act on her father’s advice when she got to her own room. Her eye had fallen on a sentence in her mother’s letter which made it quite impossible to leave the reading of all the rest till the next morning ; and so soon as she was disencumbered of her ball-dress, and had let down the heavy ropes of hair from her aching head, she unfolded the thin sheets. She read and re-read, turning back to consider particular phrases, and feeling as she did so that it mattered little, as far as she was concerned, that the hours for sleep her father called so precious were stealing away, and the faint light of an April dawn creeping into the London sky, for the thoughts her mother’s letter had called up were effectual banishers of slumber for her. This was the

letter which Lady Rivers had written, while she and Emmie sat opposite each other, waiting for Wynyard's arrival with the *charrette*, on the afternoon of Madame de Florimel's birthday *fête*. The sentence to which Alma's eyes oftenest turned back, was the one that had caused Lady Rivers to look up and study Emmie's figure in her gala dress, when she finished writing its last word. "Emmie West and your old friend Wynyard Anstice have set up quite a marked flirtation since he turned up so unexpectedly here. I always told you he was a flirt, and very easily won, but I think this last fancy of his will turn out to be the right thing for him, and that he is in earnest *at last*."

Alma laid the letter aside after a while, and sat thinking, with her hands clasped tightly over the folded sheets. Her face had flushed, and her lips curled contemptuously as she read, but gradually the colour and the angry light on her face ebbed away, and left it only profoundly sad and troubled. The effect of that subtly-concocted sentence was very different from what her mother had anticipated when she penned it. Alma's struggle with herself, as she sat watching the daylight steal into her room, was not waged against wounded feelings or disappointment at being supplanted so soon in her rejected lover's heart. She simply did not believe her mother's statement, and the feeling aroused was one of indignation against what she took to be a manœuvre designed to drive her with more headlong speed into the Kirkmans' arms.

She tried hard not to be bitter against her mother, and the careful study of the letter had been chiefly for the sake of dwelling on words and phrases that told of suffering and low spirits. She must not, she told herself, grow angry with her sick mother—but, oh, what a vista of petty manœuvres—little shoves this way and that—innuendoes which further experience proved untrue—did not that sentence open up in her memory. It bore such a likeness to a hundred other sayings of the same kind; it owed its origin so clearly to the same promptings, that it was difficult not to let it reawaken all the old buried heart-burnings. And then Alma, having forbidden herself to blame her mother, turned the weight of her indignation against herself. Was she a log, without any will or conscience of her own, to be shoved this

way and that? She fancied she could read the whole matter clearly just now, and quite easily discern the misrepresentations her mother's prejudices had thrown over Wynyard's conduct. But why had she not been as clear-sighted formerly? Why had not the strong confidence in his fidelity which made her ready to smile now at the notion of his preferring anyone to herself, come to her in old times, when her mother had made her doubt him?

Was it that the mention of a real living rival had stung her to keener jealousy than had been called forth by the old grudge against his disinterestedness which she had once found bitter? Had the deeper pain opened her eyes to the true state of her heart at last? To-night there seemed to be wonderfully little substance in her former complaints against him. She could not set them up on their feet again, or make them look anything but self-made shadows, which she had permitted to hide the reality of her own feelings from herself, and which now shrank away, leaving the truth bare. Anxious fears for Constance mingled with fears about herself, and bit by bit she recalled the days when Constance's fate was being decided upon. The small reasons—the ephemeral bribes—the paltry worldly motives that had been held before her, to lure her on to take an empty loveless life—a life from which there was no escape—none—save the one which Alma shuddered to remember *did* actually open upon the road Constance was thoughtlessly treading. That gate of swift descent, that short cut to hell, of which no one had warned her as possibly lying contiguous to the way they had represented as so safe and sure, so easy for tender feet to travel along.

Alma forcibly wrenched her thoughts away from these dark forebodings, and hoping to bring herself down into an everyday region, she took up the second note at which she had hardly looked before. The handwriting was familiar, and so was the gorgeous monogram and the seal she proceeded to break open with a languid curiosity. She had wondered a little at Horace Kirkman's absence from her sister's ball, and been in fact somewhat relieved not to see him, as it left her more at liberty to attend to other guests, and ward off remarks

on Constance's preoccupation; and now she prepared herself to read an elaborate apology and expressions of regret she could not by any means echo. The tone of the letter as she glanced through it took her greatly by surprise. Being in a highly-wrought mood, she read it with that keen intuition of the unexpressed feeling of the writer, which comes sometimes when the sympathies are widely awake. She read Horace Kirkman's thoughts through his imperfect expression of them, and divined how much importance he had attached to phrases that said so little. She had never felt so complacently towards him as when she came to the closing sentence, and felt with a rush of joy that it opened a way of escape, for which a minute ago she had been vaguely longing. She rose and went to her desk without a moment's pause, determined to answer the letter at once; truthfully, she resolved, while the truest words he had ever spoken to her were calling forth an answering impulse towards openness and honesty in her heart. She did not think much of the pain the hasty words she scribbled would certainly give the person to whom they were addressed. A bitter mood of self-contempt had followed her reflections, and the glimpse she had just had of something real and true in Horace's feeling towards her, had opened her eyes to the injustice of the bargain she had been on the point of making. If he could care much for anything beyond pomp and show and worldly success, then she had no right to take him, and the only amends she could make was to put an end to the deception at once. He was too good for her after all, this man whom she had trifled with and despised, a great deal too good for a woman who had been ready to marry him for her own convenience, while she knew that there was not one feeling of honest preference for him in her heart. These were the thoughts that flowed in an undercurrent through Alma's mind, while her fingers rapidly wrote sentences that certainly would not carry any impression of her self-humiliation or remorse to the person who was to read them.

"DEAR MR. HORACE KIRKMAN,

"I am very sorry to hear that my withdrawal from the pleasure-party planned for Thursday week is

likely to be a cause of annoyance to your father. You must, however, please to recollect that I did not promise unconditionally. I mentioned when the invitation was given that I might possibly be unable to avail myself of it when the time came. I said this to your father, and he did not, as it seemed to me, pay any attention to my warning, taking it for granted (as he is apt to do) that everything would naturally arrange itself according to his wishes. I do not, however, mean altogether to excuse myself, for I feel I have been very much to blame during the past three months, in allowing a great deal to be taken for granted by you and your friends which, according to the terms of our agreement, was to be held in abeyance till further acquaintance made us better aware of our mutual wishes. I do not want to try your patience in any way whatever beyond reasonable limits, and I am quite ready, whenever you please, to tell you the result on myself of the three months' experience we have already had. But I warn you that if you ask for it now, it will not justify you in taking for granted, as you say you wish to do, that you and your friends have claims on me to which I am ready to defer all others. I am very far from having arrived at any such conclusion at present, and I am very sorry to hear that you expect it.—Yours sincerely,

"ALMA RIVERS.

"P.S.—Do not come here till after your day at Hurlingham—I shall not be able to see you."

The daylight had entered the room through the curtained windows, and was making the wax-candles on the dressing-table burn with a sickly light when Alma sealed her letter, but it was still early enough for her to be able to move about the house without fear of encountering anybody. She felt a feverish desire to put the letter out of her power to recall or alter, before any second thoughts came to modify her present mood; so, throwing a shawl round her, she crept softly downstairs and laid her note on the hall-table, where her father always placed over-night the letters he wished to have posted the first thing in the morning. The servants

had been trained to punctuality and care in this matter, and when Alma at last laid her tired head down on her pillow and dropped asleep, it was with the thought of a step irrevocably taken, for she knew that her letter would be in the hands for whom she intended it, when her maid came a few hours hence with her morning cup of tea, to rouse her, as her father had said, to to-morrow's budget of worries.

Alma had not given a second thought to her father's remarks about the reported trouble in Saville Street. It did not even recur to her mind at once, when the portentous length of face her maid presented on drawing her curtains, warned her that some unusually tragic piece of news had to be imparted.

"What is it, Anne? You had better tell me at once," she said. "Which of my valuables have you broken or lost, or which of the household has gone away without giving warning? Nay, you don't mean that it is anything really serious? Where is my father?"

"Gone out, Miss Alma, two hours ago, but he left word that you were not to be disturbed till your usual hour after a ball. He went away with Dr. Urquhart, who called before Sir Francis had left his room. Here's a note for you, miss, that Sir Francis bade me take up to you with your breakfast."

Alma seized the twisted sheet of paper and read :

"My last night's fears have proved only too true. Urquhart has just brought sad news from Saville Street. Your poor Uncle West died suddenly yesterday afternoon, and your aunt is thoroughly knocked down by the shock. I am going now to see what can be done for them, and I think it most likely that I shall have to start this evening for La Roquette to fetch poor little Emmie home to her mother. Can you be ready to go with me? I have had some talk with Urquhart; he does not quite like the last report of your mother's health, and thinks she ought not to be hurried home or left alone even for a week at La Roquette, so you will be wanted to take Emmie's place immediately. See Constance, and make what arrangements for leaving the house you can; I will be back to talk them over with you as soon as possible."

"Is everybody as selfish as I, or am I actually a monster of heartlessness?" Alma asked herself whenever during the hurry of engagements that filled every hour of the day, a pause for thought came, and she tried to understand the state of mind into which this calamity had thrown her. Why could she not be as sympathetically engrossed with the Wests' misfortunes as she saw her father was? Why did other thoughts rush in and make to-night's journey look so like a flight from all the trouble in the world, from all the shams and cares of the world, that she could not connect it as closely as she ought with the tragedy that was its real cause? Why could she not keep her heart from bounding with a wild sense of escape and freedom when she thought of her letter to Horace Kirkman, and remembered that it could not be answered or appealed against now, till she had had that glimpse into Paradise, the anticipation of which rose like a golden mist, and hid from her the grief she ought to be sharing? It must be terribly selfish to feel thus; but whenever she had time to look down into her heart she found the secret joy there, and it would not be suppressed or denied. To escape self-reproach she occupied every moment, thinking of a dozen things for other people's comfort that might have escaped her in a less energetic mood, even to the purchasing of mourning for herself and her mother, knowing well that the outside show of sympathetic grief would be a first necessity to Lady Rivers, and would be the immediate form in which her feelings for her sister would display themselves.

Sir Francis spent a great part of the morning in Saville Street, and came back much impressed with the straits to which the West household had evidently been reduced, and with the good sense and courage displayed by Harry and Mildie in the melancholy circumstances that threw so much responsibility into their hands.

"Sensible young things, both of them," he remarked to Alma; "children that a father might, one would think, have been proud of, even if he had made a muddle of everything else he had put his hand to in life. I don't think I should have died of a broken heart, if I

had had a son with as much pluck and character as Harry West to stand by me in my misfortunes. We must see more of the lad. I wish any one of your brothers were worth half as much. I begin to suspect I have been something of a fool myself, to spend three or four hundred a year a-piece on their education, to turn them out at last a set of useless coxcombs, who will never show me a grain of gratitude as long as I live, when perhaps a little wholesome neglect and hardship might have made Harry Wests of them. There can be no *primâ facie* reason why poor old West's sons should be worth more than mine. Circumstances must be to blame for the difference somehow."

"But would you be quite satisfied to have Frank or Gerald made up over again exactly after the West pattern?" objected Alma. "You are seeing the Wests under a halo of pathos just now, but in every-day aspect I doubt your liking to be called old-chap, and slapped on the shoulder by a youth who interlards his conversation with as much slang as comes from Harry West in his normal state of spirits."

"Well, I don't know, I think I could put up with even that, to be assured of the amount of right feeling I have had good evidence of, in the West lad to-day. I could forgive a little over-familiarity, or—don't be shocked, Alma—a little want of polish, to know that I should be looked at and spoken about after I was dead, with the real love and tender reverence Harry West showed to-day, in speaking of and looking at the father whose folly and stupidity had impoverished him. Well, well, as I said before, there are compensations in all lots, and perhaps we get what we work for, fairly enough on the whole. Misfortune drew West and his lad together and made them friends, while I have been too busy all my life to cultivate much acquaintance with my sons. They look upon me as a convenient sort of machine for making money for them to spend, and I really don't know that I have been anything else to them, except, to be sure, their father, so perhaps I have no right to complain after all."

Later on in the evening, when the bustle of the start from the railway station was over, and Sir Francis and

Alma found themselves alone in a first-class carriage, Sir Francis recurred to the subject again. Under cover of the dim lamplight, he favoured Alma with a glimpse into the graver side of his mind, such as he had never shown any one since youthful aspirations and serious questions had been choked out (from expression at least) by what he would have characterised as the *real* business of life.

"Poor old West!" he began reflectively. "Harry took me up into the room where he was laid out, and I must tell you, Alma, it gave me a greater shock to see him lying there than I should have expected, considering how little we have been to each other of late. He looked much younger than when he was alive; the few hours' quiet had turned him into a fine, handsome, dignified-looking man, such as he used to be when I first knew him and was rather proud of his acquaintance. The expression of his face was as peaceful as if he had not slipped away into the other world, leaving his work undone, and his wife and children burdens on other people's shoulders. I could not help wondering, as I stood by him, how it all looks to him now. *What* does he see, for I suppose he sees something, and that the aspect of affairs is a little different on the other side of the great gulf from what it is to us here. It's wonderful perhaps, that one goes on thinking so little about that last plunge, and taking so little trouble to find out whether one is exactly on the right tack, and whether, after all, one may not find that all one's toil and struggle and hurry have been given for the wrong things. If so, to have failed mayn't matter so much as one fancies, and poor West's life, as he looks back upon it now he is out of the battle, may not be more of an overthrow than a good many other lives that look better from this side. He has kept his wife's love at all events, and got a hold on his son's memory that won't wear out. Who knows but that those possessions may be counted more to his credit out there than all he lost, all we despised him, poor fellow, for losing."

"Papa, you should not talk as if there was no one to love and appreciate you," said Alma, putting out her hand in the darkness and laying it over his.

"Well, no, I don't suppose I meant that; I am not complaining," answered Sir Francis, sinking back into his shell, after the manner of his kind, when the danger of being drawn into talk on absolutely personal topics becomes imminent. "No, my dear. It was a shock, as I said, and sets one thinking, but it does not do to dwell on such subjects too long. Reflections of the kind seldom have any result in action; one plods on pretty much in the groove one has got into, at my time of life, whatever one says. And indeed, I shall have enough to think of apart from moralising, if I'm to have, as I plainly perceive I shall, another family on my hands as well as my own. I wonder whether old Kirkman could be wrought up to interest himself about those boys, and push them on in the world for me. You'll have to see about that, Alma, when you get the reins into your hands there. I shall look to you and Horace as valuable coadjutors in my new cares, and luckily poor West's sons are more likely subjects for Kirkman patronage than any of mine. Little Emmie won't be much of a burden on anyone; and, by-the-way, was there not something about her in your mother's last letter—a hint about a match for her, was it not—but never mind, my dear," as the sudden withdrawal of Alma's hand brought a suspicion that he had stumbled upon a topic not likely to afford Alma pleasant meditations on her night journey. "Never mind, I have talked too long. You had better get a nap while you can, for I foresee a roughish passage, and I'll try if I can't spell out my *Times* by this vile lamp, for I have actually not unfolded it to-day."

Sir Francis stretched out his hands towards some newspapers which his servants had duly strapped up with the railway-rugs, and lighted upon a paragraph in which some circumstances affecting the fortunes and reputation of an old rival were commented upon. He was soon as intensely absorbed in his reading as if he had not stood, an hour or two before, half envying the peace of poor Mr. West's death-smile.

Alma drew herself as far as she could from him into a corner of the carriage, and turning her face away, thought bitterly of the inconsistencies of the con-

versation just ended. She had felt very near at heart to her father a few minutes ago; she had begun to long to tell him, that if he liked he might count on having one congenial relation—a son-in-law, if not a son, who had always appreciated him, and who could be reckoned on as a trustworthy companion and friend under any circumstances; then had come that allusion to the Kirkmans, and she had felt repulsed, driven back to the loneliness into which she had shut herself lately. Her father, then, was reckoning just now after all these reflections, on his share of advantage from the Kirkman El Dorado, to which she held the key! She knew he would be kind and just to her, when she spoke to him about that letter to Horace Kirkman, which seemed to have been written years ago, instead of this morning; but she saw also that she should have to bear the weight of his disappointment, as well as that of her mother's despair, on which she thought more and more ruefully through every hour of the long journey.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FEY.

Hopes, and fears which feed on hope,
An undistinguishable throng;
And gentle wishes long subdued,
Subdued and cherished long.

WYNYARD had lent Emmie the second volume of Laing's "Sea Kings of Norway," and on the day when Sir Francis Rivers and Alma were speeding on their way to La Roquette, Emmie took the book out into the garden, and settled herself under the hedge of roses for a thorough enjoyment of it, while Lady Rivers slept through the hottest hours of the afternoon. She was busy with St. Olaf's history, which the owner of the book had recommended to her special attention. Whether owing to that fact or to the charms of old Snorro's style, she became so absorbed in following the early vicissitudes of the Saint's career, that she forgot all about her present surroundings. She let the sweet rose scents float past

her unheeded, and even left off listening for sounds of wheels approaching from the bottom of the hill, of which her ear had been expectant the whole afternoon. Just at the most thrilling part of the narrative, however, when she was reading the account of St. Olaf's night march to Sticklestadt, and had got to the point where, seeing the morning mist roll away and disclose his foes, the Saint burst out into song, and Finn Arneson, startled at the joyousness on the hero's face, interrupts him with the cry, "You are fey, king;" something seemed to call her back out of the story, into herself and the present moment again. She stooped down, gathered one of a cluster of open-eyed Stars of Bethlehem that had been meekly lifting their milk-white faces to her from among the grass at her feet, laid the spray upon the open page to mark the sentence at which she had paused, and closing the volume, rested her elbows on it and began to think. Years and years afterwards Emmie came unexpectedly upon the crushed white flower on that page again, and lifting it up, noticed with a strange thrill of emotion how the Norse hero's saying had been stained green by the juice of the Star of Bethléhem's thick stalk crushed upon it; and remembering the bright afternoon, and all that went before and came after, she had her interest in the end of St. Olaf's story quenched a second time, though she had been reading it aloud to a pair of young auditors whose pleasure in Sagas was keener than her own had ever been. Her thoughts on this occasion soon disengaged themselves from St. Olaf. She wondered for a little while whether it was true that people were very happy just before a great trouble came upon them, and thought she had rather not know just now whether St. Olaf's triumphant outburst of song was a preface to defeat or victory. Perhaps he won the day at Sticklestadt and reigned peacefully over a united country for the rest of his life, after he saw the sun break so gloriously through that northern mist.

Emmie had no uncomfortable knowledge of history that forbade her pleasing herself with such a supposition, and then she glanced back through her own life to see if she could remember ever having been "fey" herself, and with what results. Before she had come to any conclu-

sion, her ear was caught by a sound of voices approaching her from the path that wound along the hill-side. Madame, then, had left her carriage at the foot of the ascent, and was walking to the house by a circuitous path through the fields, for the sake no doubt of inspecting her vineyards, and ascertaining whether the farm-boys had done their last week's work of weeding properly.

Emmie did not think it necessary to move from her shelter just yet. Madame was apt to stand about a long time looking at her vines and holding forth on the best methods of treatment, and her present companion, Mr. Anstice, was only too ready to seize on the first pretext that came in his way to escape the details. It would not be well for her to give him such an excuse by showing herself too soon, and though the voices grew nearer and nearer and were quite audible at last, being indeed divided from her only by the rose hedge, there was nothing in the nature of the conversation to oblige her to make her presence known. It seemed to be altogether about business, and for the first sentence or two was hardly intelligible. Now they are walking up and down on the other side of the hedge, and their voices have a charm for Emmie, though it is still only of the property they are speaking. Madame has evidently been pointing out the extent of her territory to her companion; this field and that sunny vineyard on the top of the hill, the plot of flax down in the valley, the field sown with lucerne by the river, all that long southern slope of olive-trees beyond the pine-wood, sheltered from the wind and sunned all the year round by the mid-day sun.

"A good property," madame is saying, "though insignificant according to English notions of an estate. Yet a good property."

Here she stands still and, as Emmie guesses, puts a hand on her companion's arm to arrest his attention, which no doubt had been wandering a little.

"Yes, a good property, and purchased, as I think I have told you once before, Wynyard, with money your uncle paid over to me on my father's death. I never quite believed that I was legally entitled to it, for I had always understood that my father had given me all he

had it in his power to give on my marriage; but your uncle insisted, and I confess that at the time the comfort of having a considerable sum of money in my own hands to use as I liked (for the count, to do him justice, made no claim on this unexpected legacy) was so great, that I had not the heart to remonstrate very energetically. My cousin was rich enough to be generous to his old love; and I had a scheme for his happiness in my mind at that moment which would, I thought, overpay him for all I had cost him. When that hope failed utterly, I began to look on my little hill-side farm as a property which I held in trust, rather than owned to do as I liked with, and I made up my mind that it should never go to my son with the lands belonging to the château. I have done my best for him with those, and it is owing to my good management that they are still unalienated and worth something. These few fields and my English farmhouse, as I call it, I have always intended to leave to whichever of my cousin's nephews came in for the smallest share of his wealth; and I don't deny, Wynyard, that when the news of your disinheritance came, the shock was something softened to me by the thought that I had this shred of what once was his in my power, and that I could make up for his injustice to a small extent, by choosing you to be the one to come after me here. You won't despise your inheritance because it is such a mere handful in comparison to the one you lost?"

"My dear cousin, how can you ask such a question of a landless man? You are a great deal too good to me, and I wonder you don't perceive that I am already standing several inches higher in my shoes as the notion of becoming a landed proprietor one day, dawns upon me. But it will be a very distant day I hope, and we need not talk on the melancholy subject of inheritance this glorious afternoon, need we? I assure you I can be deeply interested in the size of those wonderful clusters of vine-blossom you began by pointing out to me, without any greedy thought of owning the miracle of a vineyard that produces them by-and-by. Let us enjoy ourselves in the sunshine; why trouble our heads at all about the future just now?"

"But it is not precisely of the future I am thinking at this moment, Wynyard. I have a reason for speaking on this matter to-day, probably the last occasion when we shall be quite alone together, before we start on the journey in the course of which you are to leave me. I am very lonely in my life here, and as I grow old I cling more and more to old associations and old friends; and I have been thinking lately, that if you should marry soon and choose a girl of whom I could become fond—we will not commit ourselves to names, but you know my taste—some one, not of the great world, but well-bred and prettily mannered, who could make herself happy in simple ways with simple people; then I should like you to look upon this place as actually your own from the date of your marriage: a provision that you might settle on your wife, and a home always ready for you to come and rest in, when your business gave you a little leisure. English girls are fastidious, I know, and averse to solitude, but I do not think it would be impossible to find one unspoiled enough to love this quiet place, and be content to spend a portion of her life near me here."

"Not impossible," Wynyard answered, with a ring of amusement in his voice, which told Emmie that he was smiling inwardly at his companion's diplomacy, but taking it in good part all the same. "Not impossible; but my dear Madame de Florimel, we won't discuss the pleasant possibility at this moment, grateful as I am to you for such generous purposes towards me. We might be led on to mentioning names, you know, if we talked any more, and that would be an impertinence, since I have nothing at present to tell you except that I have no intention of ever marrying a woman of the great world, and that I am quite as much awake to the merits of a love for La Roquette as you yourself are. We had better go back to the grape clusters, I think. There is a monstrously fine trailing shoot down here. Shall we go and examine into the promise of it?"

"Leaves, my dear Wynyard, leaves that want pruning: you will never be much of a gardener, I am afraid."

The steps moved on further down the hill, and

Emmie, who for the last moment or two had been crouching with her head on her book in a horror of drawing attention to herself, and yet in an agony of embarrassment at what she was overhearing, sprang up and fled towards the house. Her limbs were trembling and her cheeks tingled when she reached the shelter of her own room, and could begin to get herself ready to meet face to face the speakers of that talk she had begun to listen to so unsuspiciously, and now felt so guilty for having overheard. Names indeed! Oh, if her name had been spoken, Emmie thought she must have packed up her clothes and rushed straight back to her mother, without even looking again into Madame de Florimel's face, or meeting those other eyes, whose half-playful, half-tender expression while those sentences were being exchanged, she could picture to herself so well. Perhaps she ought not to repeat them even to her own heart, as they were not meant for her hearing. Yet after a moment or two, when Emmie's breath had come back, and she had cooled her cheeks with the flap of her garden hat, words and tones would return to her memory, making her heart beat quickly and her cheeks burn again. It was impossible not to be quite sure that both the speakers were thinking about her, and that hers was the name that was to be understood, and not spoken. "Poor Alma!" Emmie whispered to herself. "She was the 'woman of the great world,' who could not be happy at La Roquette, whom Wynyard had in his mind when his voice sharpened for a moment. She had shut the gates of that Paradise against herself. "I am quite as much awake to the merits of a love for La Roquette as you can be." Emmie covered her face with the flap of her hat in a glow of shame at having overheard *that* in the tone of meaning in which it had been spoken, before such strange wonderful news was meant for her ears. But when she raised her head again, it was with a sense of dignity resting upon it, as if, while realising all that sentence implied, a garland of honour had noiselessly floated down, crowning her with approval so dear, ah! so dear, so beyond all expectation and hope, that it must be a defence against every other trouble or sorrow for the rest of her life.

The sound of Madame de Florimel's high-pitched voice asking for Lady Rivers at the open front door, woke her up to an immediate trouble however. She must make up her mind to come out of hiding at once, for it would never do to allow Aunt Rivers to be caught napping by Madame la Comtesse, more especially to-day, when the visit had been announced beforehand, and was made for the express purpose of consultation on arrangements for the journey to Clelles, which was now definitely fixed for the end of that week.

The château party, however, had had a second motive for their drive up the hill that afternoon. Wynyard began to explain this to Emmie as soon as the two elder ladies had comfortably dropped into a discussion on the utmost possible amount of baggage that could be packed into a carriage.

The families of Madelon and Antoine had come to an understanding immediately after madame's *fête*, and now the marriage was to be hurried on, in order that Madame de Florimel and her guest might be present at the wedding. Antoine, with many apologies for his presumption, had come that morning to remind Wynyard of a half-promise made on the evening of the dance, that he and the young English lady who had so distinguished Madelon by her friendship, would accompany the bride and bridegroom when, according to village custom, they went the round of the neighbourhood together to dispense invitations to the wedding. Madelon had been to the farm that morning to beg the same favour of Emmie, and had engaged her to be at the Orange-tree House by five o'clock, but Emmie had not as yet ventured to request leave of absence from her aunt, fearing she would frown upon the plan.

While Emmie was hesitating, and deprecating Wynyard's interference with frightened, anxious glances towards Lady Rivers, such as always roused his indignation afresh against his old enemy, the matter was skilfully taken up by Madame de Florimel, who put refusal out of the question by insinuating that Emmie would oblige her by paying this compliment to her favourite, and at the same time set her at liberty to spend an hour or two with Lady Rivers, "of whom I have seen too little, lately," she added diplomatically.

"Yes, yes, my child," madame went on, turning a beaming face of encouragement and approval on Emmie, "I know you will undertake this little duty for me while I take your place with your aunt. We shall find plenty to talk about, and she has given me leave to speak to her good Ward about the packing of her things for the mountain journey. All that cannot be done in a moment. Run away and get ready, that you may not keep our friends at the Orange-tree House waiting. The sun is hot still, but you will be in the valley during the first part of your walk, and you need not hurry home. I will take care of your aunt, and I shall not mind waiting till the cool of the evening for my drive back to the château."

Rather to Wynyard's surprise, for he had been in a very talkative mood till the walk began, a spell of silence fell upon him and his companion, when they had passed the rose hedge and had begun the descent of the hill, where Emmie insisted on choosing the most direct of the many paths between the vineyards, instead of taking the winding, shady road through the pine-wood. It was not shyness exactly that kept Emmie silent, and led her to avoid the dim solitude of the bosquet; she was too happy to be shy, but a slight chill of fear had come over her at the sight of the rose hedge, a fear of feeling "fey," of letting in the flood of happiness too soon; and her enjoyment of her afternoon holiday was just dashed with a touch of awe and shy reserve. When Wynyard, every now and then in the steep descent, held out a hand to help her over a projecting stone, or one of the many little watercourses that divided the plots of ground on the hill-side from each other, he was struck with something new in her face; a fresh expression, dignified and yet soft, through which a lovely light of tremulous restrained joy played in a half smile now and again.

Perhaps every one has a culminating moment of beauty in their lives, when their best self looks forth and shows the ideal of perfection and glory hereafter to be reached. Emmie's moment of ideal beauty came that afternoon, when, for an hour or two, the bright, frank, hopefulness of youth, and the dawning tenderness of womanhood met and crowned her with their opposite

charms,—for an hour or two—before the strength of the one quenched the other.

When they had reached the bottom of the hill, Wynyard had no excuse for turning round and looking in the face whose strange sweetness had set him wondering. He roused himself therefore to begin a conversation, and when once the spell of silence was broken, they found plenty to say, one topic seemed as fruitful as another. Everything,—the bluets in the river, the green lizard, that started up under their feet and lost itself in the lucerne, the tall flowering asphodel, whose name Emmie had never heard before—all these subjects, as they presented themselves one after the other, proved to have a peculiar interest that afternoon, and would have served, as it seemed, to talk about for ever. It could not be that Emmie said anything very well worth listening to about them, or that Wynyard was unusually eloquent, except, perhaps, about the asphodel which naturally enough had poetical associations; but every sentence, every question and answer, still more the smiles that sometimes did for answers, brought the two speakers further and further out of themselves into a fuller consciousness of delight in each other's presence, and into an existence a little outside the everyday world in which, perhaps, for the time being, they were both "fey." There was a little bit of climbing again before they got to the Orange-tree House, and Emmie's hands were full of bluets and asphodel, so that she wanted more help along the broken path than usual. Wynyard, holding one of her little hands the greater part of the way, wondered whether she would look in Saville Street as she did now, and if so, whether he had not been rather hasty in deciding that all strong emotion in life for him ended with the withering of his love for Alma. Could there be anything better, or sweeter in the world than a fresh May rose, and what expression of indignation would be strong enough for the churlish heart that should sullenly shut itself against its rare perfume?

The bridal pair in the Orange-tree House had been waiting some time for their principal supporters to join the procession, when Emmie and Wynyard appeared: and for the remainder of the afternoon these two found

themselves taking part in a village pageant, which was pretty enough in itself to make it something to remember for all the rest of a prosaic town life, if there had been nothing else to stamp the scene upon the memory. To Emmie, the march of that bridal procession up hill, through valley and hamlet in the golden sunset and the softening grey gloom that gathered afterwards, was always a walk quite by itself, fenced off from everything else in her life, a passage through an enchanted land which dropped out of existence at the end of the evening, and could never be found again—never. It was not only the sunset glory lying on the hills, and the spicy perfume of the flower-fields they passed between, that lifted Emmie so far out of her ordinary self, nor the little bursts of song in which the party indulged now and again as they climbed a steep to a group of wood-cutters' huts among the pines, or wound down to a solitary house from which, perhaps, a band of young people would troop out to meet them, returning their song, or shouting with joy and congratulation: it was not the general beauty and joyousness of that moment only she felt; there was a mingling in her memory of Eastern story and sacred parable, of descriptions dimly realised in her childhood—of brides carried with song to their homes, and virgins going forth to meet the bridegroom—which added the heightening touch of poetic elevation, an indefinite sense of awe and mystery to her mood.

The sun had quite set when they reached La Roquette, and the party made a halt on the open space before the church, to arrange their next proceedings. Antoine and Madelon, with their young friends, were invited to spend the evening at the house of an uncle of Antoine's who lived in the village, where the elders of their families were to join them, and a preliminary bridal feast to be held; but Emmie, when she was urgently pressed to be of the party, hesitated. The suggestion roused her to a recollection of the passing of time, and she looked rather anxiously, first at the sky and then at Wynyard, and asked him how they were to get back to the maisonnette, before Madame de Florimel was quite tired of waiting for them. After some consultation, she and Wynyard agreed to take leave of their companions here, and cross

the road to the château, where Joseph Marie might be persuaded to find a vehicle that would take them quickly up the hill; and as Madelon and Antoine had still to call at the priest's house, where the most important invitation of all had to be given, the adieux and thanks were less lengthy than might have been expected. The priest lived beyond the school-house, at the bottom of a little street that sloped to the edge of the river on the further side of the hill, and Emmie and Wynyard stood still under the church porch for a minute or two watching their friends, till the windings of the path hid them; then Wynyard looked at Emmie and smiled.

"How long is it," he asked, "since you and I talked over the first act of this little drama so nearly at its finis to-day? No, don't answer me. I don't want to count the weeks. It is a very short time for a love-story to have reached its climax in, but it is a long time for a holiday to have lasted, for every day of which we shall have to pay interest by-and-by. We won't even calculate how many days have passed since we stood here and were secret witnesses to the promise that is to be fulfilled in a few days."

"I don't think it is long," said Emmie, "even for a holiday. It seems to me only a day or two."

"The seasons won't let us say quite that," answered Wynyard. "The year marches on, and thrusts the lapse of time in our faces, however hard one tries to forget it. Don't you remember how pink with bloom these quince trees were when we stood under them on madame's *fête* day, and now they have nothing to show but a few over-blown blossoms and crude green leaves that set one's teeth on edge. Stay, though, here is one out-of-time spray full of fresh flowers still on the shady side of this tree, pinker than a quince blossom has any right to be, as pink as a May rose," lifting up an overhanging bough as he spoke, and showing a little tuft of blossom hidden underneath.

"Might I gather it, I wonder?" said Emmie.

"It looks as if it belonged to you, but let me reach it. There!" stretching out his hand and plucking the cluster of blooms. Then, just as he was going to put it into her outstretched hand, he drew it back again, and

said quickly, "By-the-way, do you happen to know what a bit of quince blossom used to mean long ago?"

"No," said Emmie, looking up into his face, and seeing with surprise the sudden rush of colour and emotion that crossed it. "No, I don't know anything about quince blossoms, but I should like to have that little spray you have gathered for me."

"So you shall in a minute, when I have told you what I am thinking of. I just remembered having read somewhere that it was a custom in Greece for a man to send a ripe quince to a girl when he was courting her in marriage—a better way than asking her in words, was it not? And as ripe quinces cannot be had at every season of the year, and love is not always full-blown, I was wondering whether quince blossoms might not have a meaning of their own when they are gathered for a person. What do you say to this one, which I really think must have hidden itself and refused to blow at the right time that we might find it here to-night. Will you have it?"

"It—it is very pretty, and I should like to have it very much," said Emmie, holding out her hand.

As Wynyard put the spray between her fingers his lips said: "Thank you," in a most commonplace way; but his eyes spoke a deeper gratitude, while Emmie quickly turned hers away, too shy and at the same time too glad, to let them be looked into for more than a second, finding too that the pink spray in her hand was the safest thing to contemplate just then. Its cool, fresh, pink-and-white blossoms had almost as much rest and congratulation and promise in them as a mother's or a sister's face might have had if such a one had been near.

They turned and walked in the direction of the Place in silence, and Wynyard had time both to wonder at the imprudence of his speech made under the sudden impulse of a recollection, and to congratulate himself on the great throb of joy that the remembrance of having so spoken brought with it. There was no misunderstanding that; and if this was the *real thing*, why should he look back to question or blame the impulse that had led him beyond his present intention, and shown the true state of his heart?

As they drew near the château, where their *tête-à-tête* would be interrupted, he began to long for another full look into Emmie's eyes. In that startled moment of meeting his as he gave her the flower, they had revealed a depth of tenderness and shy joy such as he had never even imagined could shine upon him from Alma's.

To make her turn her face comfortably towards him, he began to speak on quite another topic.

"I want to consult you, before we part, about the best time and way to make our little offering to the bride. I have it ready, and I had intended to ask you to present it this evening, but as you will be sure to see Madelon again before the wedding, you may as well take charge of it now, and give it when you two are alone. Madame de Florimel told me our present should be something that the bride could always wear, and as I had to send to Paris for it, I ordered a strong guard-ring; the sensible people here preferring, I understand, solid ornaments to finery. What do you think of it? It may perhaps be a little thick and clumsy, but it will have to take part in a good deal of rough work on Madelon's finger; and I want it to last till that time we talked about, when Antoine and Madelon are to tell their grandchildren in our hearing the story of the grocer's defeat on madame's *fête* day."

He made a mistake in saying *that* if he wanted Emmie to look at him, for the reference to their talk on madame's birthday brought another rush of colour; and, instead of looking up, she busied herself in unfolding the paper-parcel Wynyard handed to her, and in examining the ring—a solid hoop of gold joined in the middle by two hands clasping each other, each with a circlet of rubies at the wrist.

"But won't you give it to her yourself?" said Emmie, when she had turned it round and praised it. "I had thought of a little present too. This cairngorm brooch which I pinned into my neckerchief to-day, meaning to take it out and give it to Madelon if a good opportunity offered. Old Mrs. Urquhart gave it me when I left home, but I don't think she would mind my parting with it, if I told her all the circumstances. You think it very ugly, I'm afraid; hardly worth giving."

"No, indeed; I was only thinking I did not believe

it had ever pinned a bunch of Stars of Bethlehem into a neckerchief so daintily before. It's a splendid brooch—for old Mrs. Urquhart or for Madelon. Do as you think best about giving it, but I hope you will present the ring as well. I particularly wish *that* to be a joint offering from the conspirators who circumvented the grocer. It will be worth nothing unless it passes through your hands."

Emmie promised that Madelon should have the ring before the wedding-day, and by the time that matter was settled they were at the gates of the château, and Wynyard left Emmie to rest under the magnolias, while he found Joseph Marie and persuaded him to let them have a conveyance of some kind to take them up the hill.

Emmie found a seat under one of the trees overlooking the Place, and was not sorry to be alone for a little while. The perfect day had faded now into a lovely, still, windless evening, and the Place and the village street were very quiet and empty, more so than usual. The busy people were still at work in the fields, and the women and school-children who, at another hour, would have been knitting at their doors, or playing under the chestnuts, were just now assembled in the church, singing the hymns to Mary, which wound up the business of the day at La Roquette. Only a stray figure crossed the plane of her vision now and then. A girl coming from one of the flower-fields with a basket of roses on her head, a boy driving a flock of sheep towards the mountain from their pasture by the river, where they had been feeding all day, a mulet laden with refuse from the vineyards crossing the bridge and making all the little bells on its neck tinkle musically at every step. At the time Emmie hardly knew that these sights, which had now lost all strangeness for her, made any impression on her senses; she scarcely noticed them, but afterwards she recalled each one vividly and jealously, painting them in a glory borrowed from her own thoughts as she sat waiting for Wynyard's return. A rapturous calm, born of certainty, of content, following upon the startled joy of the preceding moment, possessed her during that little space of time, and caused the objects associated with it to remain for ever in her memory like

scenes from another world. The bridge was empty for a minute after the disappearance of the mulet, but now the people begin to flock out of church towards it; children shouting and running, old women hobbling on crutches, M. le Curé, in shovel hat and cassock, slowly emerges from the porch and takes the road to the bridge, instead of turning towards his own house. Madelon will wait a little while longer, Emmie thinks, if he is disposed for a walk in the Place before he goes home; and then her attention is distracted from M. le Curé. A vehicle, not a *charette*, but a covered travelling carriage, appears at the turn of the road close to the bridge, and the children, nay, the grown-up people, M. le Curé himself, draw up in a little crowd on the side path to get a good look at it and into it as it crosses the bridge. Travelling carriages bearing tourists to the mountains are common enough in the summer, but it is hardly the season for them yet, and the four horses attached to this one have an air about them as if they had been driven a considerable distance in great haste. Emmie half smiles at herself for being infected by the general curiosity, and for thinking that she too will take a hasty glance into the travelling carriage as it passes the Place. Perhaps there is a bridal pair inside, as happy as that expectant one who are now peeping out from the Curé's door to watch for his return.

The speed of the carriage slackens now that it has passed the bridge, the driver appears to be pulling up to ask his way. What a lucky chance for all the people. M. le Curé steps forward to give the information required, and a head is thrust out from the carriage-window to question him further. For a moment Emmie's eyes refuse to convey an intelligible impression to her brain. It must be an illusion; but now another of her stunned senses is assailed, and she hears Uncle Rivers's voice asking in English-French the way to the farmhouse on the hill, where two English ladies are living; and another face, Alma's face, pale and grave, appears behind his, putting the same question in more intelligible language.

At the first moment, as Emmie remembered with keen remorse afterwards, she did not think about home; no fear even for her mother assailed her. Her heart died

down into a lump of lead in her bosom, but it was at the sight of Alma's face. That beautiful, proud face before which she herself seemed to fade into nothing, in presence of which, as it appeared just then to Emmie, her own poor little evanescent dream of joy must shrivel up and wither quite away. What would it cost Alma to take it all up and with a word or a look crush out its life?

After all, it was but for an instant. Emmie heard her own name called from the carriage before she had really had time for more than one thought about herself, and as she sprang up and hurried towards her uncle, something in his face awoke a fear that swallowed up all other thoughts. Uncle Rivers would not look at her like that unless he had some very bad news from Saville Street to tell her. Sir Francis sprang from the carriage and took her in his arms when they met.

"Mamma, is it mamma?—Oh, not mamma!" she whispered into his kind sympathising face.

"No, not that, not that, my poor, dear child," he said, trying to make his voice as reassuring as he could. "But how fortunate that we should meet you here; we were hoping to get hold of you first to have a little quiet talk without alarming your aunt suddenly. Get into the carriage, my dear. No, I am speaking the truth; your mother is in no danger, but—there has been illness. She wants you, and I have come to fetch you. You shall hear all as soon as you are in the carriage, my dear."

Alma had descended into the road after her father, and when Emmie lifted her head from her uncle's shoulder, where it had sunk for a moment, she saw that Wynyard had come out of the château, and was standing still in amazement, looking at the group by the carriage,—no,—it was on Alma's tall figure that his eyes were fixed, and his face wore a startled almost dismayed expression, that Emmie noticed even then. He came up to the carriage before it started, and spoke to Sir Francis; but Emmie threw herself far back on the seat, and covered her face and her ears with her hands, dreading to hear the answer to his question, refusing to herself to look at him while he heard, for fear of knowing too soon. When the carriage had gone a little way down the road, however, a sudden fear of never seeing the place again seized her.

If her mother wanted her she must start on her return journey at once, that night, and she should most likely never see La Roquette again in the daylight as long as she lived. Rather to her uncle's and Alma's surprise, she jumped up and looked out of the carriage-window, craning her neck to get an extended view. Wynyard was still standing at the château gate, and he waved his hand, surprised also to get another glimpse of her little white face; but it was not his figure, his last look after her, that Emmie saw and tried to fix in her memory. Alma, from her side of the carriage, might be looking too. It was the twilight scene she was moving away from that she gazed at, till the carriage reached the curve of the hill. The grey château, the dark green magnolia trees; the village street, where the children stood in groups staring after the carriage; the winding river with its tall canes, and old stone bridge; and the red church tower among the quinces and olives, crowning the eminence beyond—"The place where I have been happy"—Emmie said to herself, with a great foreboding cry of her heart, as it lessened and lessened in the distance.

"And now, uncle," she whispered, sinking back into her seat, when they had passed the curve of the hill—"Tell me why it is that mamma wants me, I should like to know at once."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE SERPENT IN THE GARDEN.

And it bears the fruit of Deceit,
Ruddy and sweet to eat;
And the raven his nest has made
In its thickest shade.

SIR FRANCIS RIVERS stayed one night at the maisonnette, and started on his return journey with Emmie early on the following morning. They were to take the train at the nearest station, and by travelling day and night hoped to reach London on the morning fixed for Mr. West's funeral.

"Poor little Emmie!" Sir Francis said to Alma, who had come down early to give him breakfast before he

started. "It will be a dismal change for her. She seems to have been making herself very happy here, and very useful to your mother, and I don't like dragging her away to such a miserable state of things as she will find in Saville Street; but her arrival just before the funeral will be a comfort to her poor mother. Urquhart urged it; and after all she must, poor child, face the desolation some time. She is bearing it well, you say, and seems tolerably composed and reasonable this morning—no tears or hysterics, eh?" Sir Francis asked, with a puzzled anxiety, not feeling, in spite of his compassion for Emmie, the courage to take a very tearful companion on such a long journey, or knowing exactly how to set about the task of comforting poor West's daughter, if she should say things in praise of her father that he could not by any means agree to.

"You need not be afraid, papa," said Alma; "Emmie is very quiet, and says little even to me. I don't think you will find her difficult to manage on the journey; perhaps I had better go now, and see that mamma does not detain her with a long good-bye. I have all your directions, have I not? You decided that the journey to Clelles, as arranged by Madame de Florimel, might as well be carried out by mamma and me?"

"Yes, if you think it best to take your mother away from this house so soon."

"I am sure of it—mamma will never like the place again after hearing such news here; there is nothing for her but change of scene when she is in low spirits."

"Yes, and I am glad that you will have companions to help in rousing your mother—otherwise I should be almost as sorry for you, my dear, as I am for Emmie. Your mother is—it is better to say it out—apt to be a little unreasonable when she is unhappy, and she seems bent this morning on taking poor West's death as an argument for proving her own state of health to be worse than was supposed. Nothing I urge to the contrary seems to make the slightest impression. However, you know how to bear with her, Alma, and are perhaps less likely to be tempted to argue the point than I am; though, to be sure, I ought to have learned the uselessness of reasoning with her, by this time of our lives.

The change, and Madame de Florimel's society, will at all events divert your mother's thoughts for a while, and if she does not recover her spirits in a week or two, or Clelles does not suit her, I must make a push to come out to you, when affairs in Saville Street have shaped themselves a little, and I can get away from my work again. Meanwhile you must write often to me, Alma—ah! there is the crack of the driver's whip; the carriage is coming up to the door. You had better go and bring poor little Emmie down, I think—there is no time to lose."

Alma found Emmie fully equipped, and her packages neatly strapped ready for the journey. Tearless, too, with nothing about her that need have made the greatest dreader of emotion object to her company; yet with a quiet despair in her eyes, which struck Alma as altogether too sad even under the circumstances, for she could not bring herself to see Mr. West in the light of a very irreparable loss, let him be ever so much one's father.

Emmie was standing by the dressing-table when Alma entered, taking some flowers from a vase, and laying them together with very trembling fingers.

"Let me help you," Alma said. "You can hardly hold them; but do you think it worth while to take flowers on such a long journey? They will be dead long before you get to London."

"Yes, I know," said Emmie, in the same quiet, dull voice in which she had answered all Alma's remarks since she came. "I know they will die directly, but——" She did not finish her sentence, but she did not yield the half-faded branch of quince blossom she held, to Alma's hand, stretched out to take it away; her fingers seemed to cling to it, and, in spite of their trembling, she finished making up her bouquet without letting her cousin touch the flowers. Alma was satisfied that she would not be a very helpless travelling companion for her father, in spite of that look of overpowering pain in her eyes. She had more self-command and strength of will than one would give her credit for, to look at her.

Lady Rivers was of course vociferous in her lamen-

tations when Emmie went to wish her good-bye, and Sir Francis had to come upstairs at the last possible minute and carry her off, leaving Alma to soothe her mother as best she might.

Except a distant glimpse of the carriage as it wound down the hill, Alma saw no more of the travellers, but she heard many stray scraps of news of them during the long tedious days that followed. Whenever she came across any of the people belonging to the farm, they stopped her to impart some piece of intelligence that had travelled up the hill, and was being circulated through the neighbourhood by some lucky person who had caught a passing glimpse of Emmie's face, or figure, as the carriage drove through the village. The farther away from La Roquette that the glimpse had been obtained, the more valuable it was held to be, and the greater interest was attached to a full account of it. As the days passed, and the interest did not diminish, Alma felt bewildered, not knowing how to reconcile this universal occupation of a whole neighbourhood about Emmie West with the family opinion of her insignificance.

"That poor sweet mademoiselle," La Fermière began, seating herself by Alma's side in the porch on the last evening before her departure, and talking as familiarly to her as if she had been Emmie—"That dear Mademoiselle Emmé, the whole neighbourhood is desolated at her having been carried away from us so suddenly, and for so sad a cause. The other night at the dance at Père Barbou's, some one brought in the sad news among the wedding-guests, and it was one exclamation of regret, one cry of sorrow. Madelon, the bride of to-morrow, wept; oh! how she wept, in spite of the bad omen of tears at a betrothal feast; and her lover could not chide her, for he was almost as bad himself. It was terrible, and then Madame la Comtesse and her English relation who were to have assisted at the wedding to-morrow, with Mademoiselle Emmé, only imagine what their feelings must be to-day! Very little sleep they had we may be sure on that sad night when the news came, hardly more than the dear Mademoiselle Emmé herself, who looked so white, so white on the morning she left us, and who yet stopped to kiss little Jean Baptiste at the

last moment, when she was getting into the carriage. After that, as far as one hears, she took no notice of anyone. *Le gros Jean* who was working by the roadside five miles from La Roquette that morning, affirms, indeed, that the carriage passed him closely, and that *Mademoiselle Emmé* made him a sign of farewell from the window; but still it is well known that while she was in the village she never looked out—no, not even when the carriage passed the château, though madame herself was standing out at the gate, longing—so *Joseph Marie* tells us—for a look, or a word. Well, well, the world goes round; and it is now a funeral, and now a wedding that one is hurried to. But that dear *demoiselle*—to have seen her and the relation of madame, as they passed through that little gate in the rose hedge, on their way to the valley three days ago. Hold, *mademoiselle*, I was watching them from the window of my dairy down there, and certainly it was not of death and misfortune one was reminded in looking at them. The one as beautiful as the other—as I ventured to tell madame not twelve hours after, who laughed like this; but, bah! *mademoiselle* wishes to be alone”—and *La Fermière* at last gathered up her knitting, and walked off to her own end of the house. Alma quite understood the unfavourable comparisons between herself and *Mamselle Emmie* that the good woman made as she went.

Still, with all these distractions, how long the days of preparation were to Alma! Her heart was heavy and anxious, and yet she could not help feeling irritated instead of sympathetic with her mother's constant wailings, which always seemed poured out over the least legitimate causes of complaint. She racked her brains for consolatory remarks, and found all her efforts useless, since nothing but a direct assurance that she would marry *Horace Kirkman* without delay, and undertake that his father should make the fortunes of all the West orphans—would satisfy her mother's requirements, or give her the only comfort she would accept. Under the guise of complaint and condolence, a wearying contest of wills went on all day long, and Alma had no time to give to anticipations of the mountain journey and the companionship it would bring her into, till late on the last

evening, when Lady Rivers had fallen asleep, and she sat for more than an hour at the window in Emmie's little bedroom, listening to the song of a nightingale that, from the rose hedge, was filling the garden with melody.

Her spirits rose under this soothing influence, and she found her thoughts straying far away from the Wests' troubles, and complacency with her present situation creeping in. Three days out of her old life given back to her—that she thought was going to happen—three days out of her youth, before ambition and worldly councils had spoiled her; three days of complete forgetfulness of the Kirkmans; three days of such interchange of thought and sympathy as, she believed for her, could only be had with one person, and must never be tasted again. That, at all events, she might hope for, to say nothing of possibilities arising from these, which, in the hush of the soft night, looked quite near and easy of attainment.

The first day's journey was to be a short one, and the start was not to take place till after twelve o'clock, as Madame de Florimel had an engagement in the morning, and Lady Rivers wished to await the arrival of the post which might bring news of the travellers. This would be the last opportunity of receiving letters for some days; and Alma, having heard of the uncertainty of the *facteur's* movements, came out into the porch once or twice during the early morning to watch for his approach as Emmie had so often done.

She was in much better spirits this morning, and more sociably inclined towards the inmates of the farm when they came up to her, for things were altogether looking brighter. Lady Rivers had slept well, and was equal to taking an interest in the packing, and in the prospect of the mountain drive; and besides, Joseph Marie had been to the maisonnette with a message from madame, long before the English inhabitants of the best rooms were awake; and Alma felt sure that if there had been a departure from the château yesterday, Madame Dallon would have told her of it the first thing, when she came up into the porch, to point out the road down which the *facteur* might soon be seen approaching, and which they were to follow for the first stage of their journey.

"A hot drive they would have in the middle of the day, to-day," Madame Dallon waited to remark. "But what would you have? madame could not disappoint the good Claires of her presence at their daughter's wedding this morning. Yes, the wedding that is going on precisely at this moment in the church down there. If mademoiselle had been up a little earlier and had chosen to climb the brow of the hill and stand under that clump of fig-trees, she might have seen madame, and monsieur her English relation, and M. le Curé crossing the Place on their way to church. Alas, that Mademoiselle Emmé should not be one of that party! Stay—this piece of orange-blossom; mademoiselle sees how fine it is—it is from a tree that Jean Baptiste calls his own, and he had flattered himself, the poor child, to present a bouquet to his dear Mademoiselle Emmé this morning; and now for want of better he has stuck it here in his mother's cap. Hark! the bell—that is the signal that mass is half over, and in another ten minutes or so the procession will be leaving the church. Will mademoiselle come to the fig-trees, or will she wait here and take in the letters should the *facteur* pass within the next quarter of an hour?"

Alma smilingly declined the scramble up hill, and her companion, overjoyed to be set at liberty, ran off, shaking the spray of orange-blossom from her head on to the path as she ran. Alma took the trouble of going to pick it up, and then stood still for a minute or two, turning her head to catch the faint tinkling of bells far below in the valley which the soft wind brought at intervals to her ear. A swift little joy note, now clear, now faint, now dying away, and again sounding a *reveillé* to gladness and hope. But for that, the house and garden were intensely still, for Lady Rivers and her maid were busy in the upper story, and all the other inhabitants had betaken themselves to the point of observation under the fig-trees.

As Alma mounted the steps again, it flashed into her mind that this was the day when she was to have gone to Hurlingham with the Kirkmans, and the party of great people whom poor Mrs. Kirkman would be puzzled to entertain without her help. Horace would have been

coming to fetch her soon, and she would have been at her toilette just now hard at work, really interested and anxious to shine forth among the guests, and make the doubtful entertainment a splendid success by the sheer force of her social gifts and fascinations. A splendid dress, a present from old Mr. Kirkman for the occasion, which Alma blushed to think she had accepted willingly, was hanging up useless in her wardrobe at this moment. Would there ever come another suitable occasion for her to wear it, or was she really, *really* going, during this journey, to bid good-bye to that part of her life—to the side of her character that loved it—for ever?

She crossed her arms on the balcony at the top of the steps, and fixed her eyes on the point of the road where she expected the postman to appear, but her thoughts were soon too busy for observation. She wondered over the strange interweaving of lots—joy to one, grief to another—that go to make the crises of life. What a great many people's loss and trouble had it not taken to buy this chance of a new decision for her, and the tranquil, bright days during which it would be possible for her to make it. Poor little Emmie West, was she thinking of the contrast, too? The very flower in Alma's bosom whose strong fragrance forced itself on her notice through her reverie, was Emmie's by right. It had budded for Emmie, and now it was breathing its full-blown perfume into her face. Yes, it was strange how things were ordered. Alma's thoughts wound round and round this question, touching it and straying a little beyond her own personal concerns, to grapple with the problem why benefit to one should, as it seemed, be bought by loss to another; but she did not, as Emmie might have done, turn her perplexity into a prayer. Serious thought with her was more prone to exhale itself in half-discontented speculation than to turn into prayers, though at that moment, as she remembered afterwards, there was a whisper in her conscience urging her to send up one cry for light and guidance in what she felt was likely to be a turning-point of her life,—one prayer that she might not be allowed to make a cruel use of other people's sorrow, and put her foot upon another's life, to reach what she

wanted for herself. It was a little whisper, not so distinct to her mental ear as the tinkling of the joy-bell in the valley, and it sank into silence soon, when it was not heeded.

She was roused from her absorption by a voice addressing her, and turning round, she saw that the postman (who must have passed down the road unseen by her) was mounting the steps with a packet of letters in his hand. He would not let her take them till he had delivered himself of a long explanation of his reasons for leaving the letters for the château with her, as well as those addressed to the maisonnette.

"Was not madame coming up the hill in half an hour?" he asked, smiling, and pointing to a spray of orange-blossom in his button-hole. "Yes, he too was a wedding-guest, though unluckily too late for the ceremony. If the young lady would only relieve him of the last contents of his bag—this great bundle of letters for the château—he should be at liberty to return through the bosquet and join in welcoming the bridal party at the Orange-tree House on their return from church."

Alma took the letters with only a nod of acquiescence, and returned to the house, examining them as she went. There was nothing from Paris, but there was a thick envelope from Constance; and Alma, in dread of hints that might make her mother uneasy respecting Conny's home-life, turned into a little side room opening upon the hall, to read her sister's letter through, where she could be sure of being alone and uninterrupted. It was a kind of store-room, where Madame Dallon kept her billets of wood and the flax for her spindle, and it had no other furniture than an old chest with deep drawers, filled with wine corks which the boys had cut down during the winter evenings.

Alma put the château letters on the top of this chest, and stood near it while she read Constance's.

The first sheet was just what she expected—home-news, interspersed with little hints about Sir John's habits, which made her thankful that she had taken the precaution of looking it through before giving it to her mother; but the second page began differently, and Alma was soon reading with startled eyes, and breath that came and went quickly:

“Dearest,—Lawrence has just been here. You won’t scold me when you hear the news he came to tell. I can’t help calling it joyful news, though it is shocking, too, and makes me feel as if everyone was going to die. Poor Uncle West!—and now a very different life cut short quite as suddenly. You remember, don’t you, that Lawrence is related to the Anstices? Have you guessed it, Alma? Yes, it is that, the thing you once scolded me for wishing might happen some day. Poor young Lord Anstice is dead. He was drowned two nights ago, while crossing from Strome in a storm. His mother had been taken ill at a little fishing-lodge belonging to him in Skye, where she had gone at this unfit time of year, to spite him, Lawrence thinks, after a quarrel, which she said drove her from Leigh; and in hurrying to her, poor fellow, he met his death. She was always an odious woman, although I don’t know why I say this, except to keep myself and you from being too sorry for her; there is so much to make us glad. Alma dearest, Wynyard—our Wynyard, *your* Wynyard is Lord Anstice now, and possessor of all that great fortune; and whatever difficulties the Kirkman entanglement puts in the way (yes, I shall call it an entanglement now),—you and he must, you shall, come together again. I will move heaven and earth for it if you won’t! You will be shocked just at first; but, oh! I wish I was near you to pull your hands down from your face, and kiss the colour back into your cheeks, and force you to see it as I see it. I will never forgive you, Alma, if you let this great good fortune and happiness slip away from you, by any foolish scruples or false delicacy. Listen to me,—listen to me, we must one of us be happy—and I am not happy. I have never whispered it before, but I tell you, speaking from my heart now, that you may be as anxious as you ought to be, to escape marrying as I did. Oh, Alma, every day as I dress and undress, as I look round my house, and get into my carriage, I say to myself—it was not worth while—even what I have got does not seem to be mine, for my life is a sort of phantom to me, there is no reality in it, and I have no power to hold firmly even the outward prosperity people call mine. The days go by in a whirr and a dream, and when I

venture to think a little, I can only say to myself, over and over again, that I am not happy, and that I dare not look forward, and that if a wish were to shape itself in my mind now, it would be such a wicked one, that I shudder to think I am in danger of entertaining it. And mamma said I was to be so *safe*, lifted up above all the dangers and cares of life. But you, Alma, oh! you will have just everything,—the praise and envy of all your friends, and a high place in the world, and the man you love besides. It is lucky that you never actually wrote a refusal to Wynyard, or allowed it to be said publicly that you were engaged to Horace Kirkman. You were waiting, that was all. And surely it won't be difficult, now you have Wynyard all to yourself, to make him forgive that little delay. My secret hope, and reason for writing at once is that you may perhaps get this news a few hours before it reaches him. I should like him to see you, to have a few words with you, to get a little hint of your feelings, before he hears of this change of circumstances, it would make it all so much easier for you. You always called me a schemer, but is there any harm in scheming to bring about this perfect thing which would please everybody, and make two people, who have loved each other so long, happy at last? It would be too miserable if you let pique or misunderstanding come between you, now that all real obstacles are removed. Wynyard is just a little crotchety we all know—but I trust to you, Alma, not to let this great joy slip from you, for want of acting."

The last sentence was written on a half-sheet of paper, and Alma, when she had read it, let it slip through her trembling fingers and saw it float downwards, blown by a puff of wind into the depth of one of the drawers of the chest which stood half open. Her eye followed it mechanically till it rested on a surface of cork, but she did not stoop to recover it; she half wished she could get rid of the whole letter so, and of the tumult of anxiety, dismay, and yearning it had awakened in her mind. How could she compose herself to meet Wynyard a few moments hence, possessed of this knowledge? Nay, how could she herself give him the very letters that would convey it to

him? *The* news that would once have concerned her so nearly—and that seemed such a mockery now when it would be, as she felt it would, in spite of all Constance's suggestions, a barrier instead of a furtherance to her wishes. Her eyes fell on the packet of letters reposing on the top of the press. It was there certainly, in one of those long envelopes. It was too important news, he was too important a personage now, for someone not to have thought of summoning him back to England at once to take possession. How could Constance call it good news for her? It was the overthrow of the hopes she had been indulging since she came here. It made them possible and impossible at the same moment, for now she could never make Wynyard believe that she had been on the point of yielding before the change came which made her yielding no longer a proof of disinterested love.

How could she, without incurring his contempt, give him now that little hint about her present relations with Horace Kirkman, which she had thought might perhaps come into one or other of the talks they would have during the three days' travelling together? Half an hour ago this had seemed so easy, and now——oh, why had Constance written?

Alma crushed the letter, and went out into the porch again, and stood looking over the garden towards the road, along which the farm people were now returning to the house. She tried to think about them, about the marriage just over; about Madame de Florimel, whom she had only just seen; of anything and everything she could bring before her mental vision, to crowd out a suggestion that had darted into her mind when her eyes fell on Wynyard's letters, and was threatening to seize upon her imagination with the grip of a strong temptation. Was it that her will to repel it was weak, or that she did not fight the evil thing with the only efficacious weapons, for even while she believed she was thinking of other things, the temptation crept back, entering into her thoughts by unexpected avenues, till, as the time for action shortened, she found herself parleying with it and bringing the subtlety of her reason to strip it of its obvious ugliness, and give it new shape and colour. "Let me imagine for a moment" (this was the road by which the

temptation crept back) "let me just imagine what would certainly have happened if the postman had been late this morning, as Madame Dallon says he so often is. If he had gone straight to the wedding-feast and neglected to deliver the letters here, till after we had started on our journey, they could not have overtaken us till we had reached Clelles. What a moment it would have been for us—I will say us this once in my thoughts—when he had opened those letters and came to me with them in his hand. We should have renewed all our old intimacy on the journey, and he would know by that time I had broken off with the Kirkmans because I found I could not give him up in my heart. He would be full of grief for his cousin at first, and I should comfort him—I, who know how so well; and when the time for personal thoughts arrived, the keenest pleasure would come with the recollection that I had yielded in ignorance of what was coming. How he would congratulate himself, and thank me for having given him such a proof of disinterested love. He would tell me, I know, that it was more than all his new honours and fortune and made them worth having. It would be a perfect reconciliation, a full restoration for me to all I lost in his esteem. Then what a triumph I should feel in telling mamma, how smooth and pleasant all the way would be, nothing to give up, nothing but roses, congratulations, joy, for everybody. For what a different thing it would be asking favours from Wynyard for the Wests, or for my brothers, from worming help out of old Mr. Kirkman, who can hurt one equally in giving or refusing. But I should never have to *ask* Wynyard, only perhaps to put out my hand to restrain the too generous, eager giving; nay, that would not be necessary now, he will be able to do all he wishes. What a position he will take at once, how popular, how sought after, how really great he will be, with his talents and eloquence and winning ways and enthusiasm, which will be no hindrance now, only another power. Papa would be proud of him; it would be a real bit of good luck and satisfaction coming into his life through one of his children at last. Oh, I cannot, I must not give up all this happiness. We must be reconciled before Wynyard

hears the news. It must be Wynyard Anstice in his old circumstances to whom I tell the story of my break with Horace Kirkman. There would always be a little doubt—a little cloud between us if we came together afterwards. And, besides, we never should come together. Wynyard is not the man to marry a woman about whom he has a little doubt, who had fallen from the pedestal even a little; it is all or nothing with him. And I should not be really deceiving him, I should be making him happy in the only possible way that is left; for—don't I know well in my secret heart that I have always preferred him. Patience—time—was it my conscience whispered that? But no! it must be done now; time would bring no help to me; we should drift further and further apart, and oh, I cannot bear to lose him now that I have let myself hope again. That must be the little gate that woman said she saw him pass through yesterday with Emmie West. Emmie West—I would not even let myself think of such a possibility a day or two ago, but perhaps I had better look at it for a moment now. Emmie and Wynyard—and I alone! Emmie, Lady Anstice! It would be a mistake, an absurdity. He cannot love her, for he loved, he loves *me*, and she is a child who thinks of nothing but Saville Street troubles and her mother; but he might take a romantic idea now of lifting her up because she has been always lowly, and perhaps, who knows, poor child, has shown an interest in him in his poverty? If he goes on thinking of me as Horace Kirkman's promised wife a little while longer, that is what will happen."

Madame Dallon is within a few paces of the garden-gate now; in another minute or so she will catch sight of Alma's figure in the doorway and begin to talk to her, and Alma's life will be fixed.

"By such a little accident as that, shall it be fixed?" she asks herself. "Could one bear, through a lonely disappointed life, baulked every way, to remember always that one's destiny hung in the balance once, and that one let a little event like that decide one's action? No, one could not bear it. Remorse, if it came in weak moments afterwards, would be easier to put aside than a haunting, tantalising recollection like that!"

Madame Dallon did call out to Alma with her hand on the gate. She called to announce that madame had got into her carriage at the church door, instead of returning to the château, and that the four horses harnessed for the mountain journey were making such speed up the hill that she might be expected at the Farm in a quarter of an hour. Her shrill voice carried the words beyond the vestibule into the little room where Alma was standing, by the time her sentence ended, and they steadied her hand from trembling too much to accomplish the object she was set upon—the sorting the château letters into two heaps, one for Madame de Florimel and one for W. Anstice, and the letting those last drop from her fingers into the drawer of the old cork chest. It had evidently been left half-open for weeks, perhaps since the winter evening when the boys had thrown in their last batch of cut corks, for there was quite a thick ridge of dust on the rim; but Alma closed it with one resolute push, and still had time to come out of the room with Madame de Florimel's letters in her hand and put them down on the balustrade of the stone steps before anyone entered the house.

Everyone allows an acted lie to be morally as reprehensible as a spoken one, but at the same time most people find it easier to act than to speak a falsehood, and Alma felt a sort of gratitude to fate when she perceived Madame Dallon was standing with her back to the porch, chatting with a neighbour as she came out, and that she could thus escape having to tell her in so many words that the letters she laid down were what the postman had brought to the door that morning.

A quarter of an hour later Madame de Florimel appeared in the carriage, but no Wynyard. He had chosen to ride instead of accepting the fourth place in the carriage, and was gone on before. Madame de Florimel explained rather pointedly to Alma that this was a new arrangement, and was due to her cousin's reluctance to intrude on Lady Rivers under present circumstances.

"He would not withdraw altogether from the expedition on my account," she said, "as I depend on his escort, and should not have undertaken the journey without him; but it has lost, as you can easily imagine,

all special interest and attraction for him since we heard of the sad departure yesterday morning." She smiled significantly as she concluded, but no one responded.

They had just driven through the garden-gate and were turning their backs on the rose hedge and the many-windowed maisonnette, with its olive trees and strip of vineyard and sheltering wood behind, but it was not on that account that madame's remark received no answer. No one stood up to take a last look, though the farm people were assembled about the gate, and did not fail to remark to each other how different it would have been if Mademoiselle Emmé had been there. Lady Rivers was adjusting her wraps and her veil, Ward was fussing to find the best place for her mistress's dressing-case, and Alma held her head down and steadily avoided looking back. It was a greater effort than she had expected. What was the maisonnette to her, except, indeed, as the tomb of those letters now lying in the dark, among the corks in the store-room chest? To avoid the danger of seeing them there constantly, she believed that it would be advisable to take away as few impressions of the place in her memory as possible, and so she strenuously resisted a haunting inclination to look back; not being sure besides, that, if yielded to, it would not have resolved itself into an impulse to stop the carriage and run back and fetch what had been left behind.

The struggle was a painful one, and when it was over and the distance from the maisonnette too great for any possibility of running back, a spirit of angry defiance took possession of Alma's mind. She knew what Madame de Florimel was thinking of, when she smiled that little smile, and she mentally pitted her own strength of will and power to carry out a purpose, against hers. There must be victory for her in the silent, unacknowledged struggle she foresaw, for how could she ever bear to remember what she had done, unless the results of her action were so triumphant as to carry her in a full tide of happiness over all temptation to regret.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

Entbehren sollst du, sollst entbehren,
Das ist der ewige Gesang.

EMMIE behaved, according to Sir Francis's views of companionship, unexceptionably on the journey. She answered in a soft little voice, whenever he spoke to her, looked after her own travelling bag and rug when they changed carriages, and when tears came, shed them quietly and unostentatiously in a corner of the carriage with her face turned, so as to let him see as little of them as possible.

"Poor child, poor child!" he thought, giving her all the more attention because she exacted so little. "How sensibly she behaves, that old donkey of a father of hers was not worth such nice quiet tears; she shan't miss him, I vow. Something must and shall be thought of for her." And when it grew too dark to read the newspaper, Sir Francis, who had worked out all the legal problems requiring his immediate attention on his previous night's journey, actually allowed his thoughts to stray to his own family affairs, and elaborated a whole midsummer night's dream of speculative fancies, while the train carried them on, through the early hours of the soft southern night. "What was that hint about a marriage for Emmie in one of his wife's late letters—Wynyard Anstice? But was not he the man in whom Alma had once appeared to be interested, who had once spoken about Alma to him, in a way that he liked. Would it be well for Alma's happiness, under present circumstances, that he should connect himself with the family; might it not give rise to unfavourable comparisons? Alma, Emmie, Horace Kirkman, Wynyard Anstice, the four figures rose before his mental vision, and, as a suspicion of drowsiness came on, kept changing places towards each other as capriciously as if Puck might be expected to operate upon them. Some one in the family evidently must marry Horace Kirkman, Sir Francis thought. Now that all these hungry young

Wests had to be provided for, some one must marry Horace Kirkman and act as conductor into family channels of the Kirkman wealth, and the vast patronage that bullet-headed rogue of an old Kirkman had got hold of; but what a pity that the notion of securing the prize for quiet little Emmie had not occurred to anyone. It would have been great promotion for her, poor little soul, and she would have made a capital little conductor. Such quiet tears as those, and the sweet little wistful smiles that came when she tried to rouse herself out of them, would draw anything from any man, and she might have built up her brothers' and even her cousins' fortunes with perfect comfort to herself, without any of those qualms and disgusts that he feared would assail Alma. His Alma he began to think was almost worthy of the promotion of being reserved as the chosen companion of the years when he should have withdrawn altogether from public life, and taken to cultivating his literary tastes again. She might as well, with that object before her, marry Wynyard Anstice as not. Sir Francis thought that in those leisure days he should care a good deal for seeing Alma happy, and his heart quite warmed towards Wynyard, as he pictured him dropping in of evenings with Alma, and discussing points in that History of the Law of Inheritance he designed for the work of his old age, with such understanding and interest as could only be expected from a man of Wynyard's intelligence and culture.

Alma married to Horace Kirkman, would be another thing. There could be no rational conversation with husband and wife there, and undoubtedly intellects were dulled in the course of time by constant companionship with fools. What a pity that those pairs of lovers could not change places once more. And with half recollections of a recent visit to a theatre where "The Midsummer Night's Dream" had been acted, and confused visions of playhouse fairies pressing Love in Idleness on Horace Kirkman's eyes, Sir Francis dropped comfortably into a deep sleep.

Emmie felt herself really alone for the first time since the news came, for the first time since she had left the bench under the magnolia-tree where she sat welcoming

such a beautiful hope to her heart. Sir Francis would have been very much surprised if he had known the storm of feeling which raged within his apparently calm little companion (careful all the time not to disturb his repose by any restless movement) during the long night while he slept, and the train rushed through the darkness. It was not despair, or any keen sense of loss that made that night a never-to-be-forgotten passage through the valley of the shadow of death to Emmie. It was one of those mental struggles, such as only comes to natures capable of very deep love, from which, if the battle ends in victory, the soul rises up new born, dead to self and self-love, alive to all the higher kinds of devotion for evermore. A temple of God which, having known the horror and darkness of a sudden emptying, keeps the eternal light burning for ever afterwards on its altar. It was a struggle for surrender of the will only; for Emmie knew that there was no action possible for her, though at times for a few moments she let herself imagine impossible things, such as making an appeal to Wynyard not to desert her for Alma. She did not know why she felt so sure that his heart would turn back to Alma. Sometimes a pale hope lifted up its head and whispered that she too was young, she too was beautiful. She had loved with her whole soul, why should not she be chosen even with Alma by; but after listening to the voice for a minute, she told it to be still. Its sayings seemed to her beside the question after all, for what she wanted to think about was what would be best for him, what would make his life most complete. Had she not once seen him suffer, and felt then that she could give all the happiness and joy that might ever be coming to her, to buy for him what he wanted? It was strange to feel so for an almost stranger; perhaps it was wrong, or perhaps that was only what one ought to feel for everybody. That white heat of love in which all sacrifice seemed joyful might be what we were meant to live and walk in, towards the common people of our lives; and then Emmie's heart bled to think that she had called her mother a common person, and doubted the possibility of joyful sacrifice for her and for the others. Saville Street life, with all its little anxious details and

privations and ugliness came before her, looking darker than it had ever looked before, from contrast with the freer life she had tasted. She asked herself if she was ready to take up its burden again, on bruised shoulders too, for she fancied just then that in bidding good-bye to the love-dream which had come to her on that golden afternoon, she was shutting out all joy and strength from her life, shutting herself into prison.

Emmie put up her hand to feel for the little branch of quince-blossom that was still pinned by the cairngorm brooch out of sight under her shawl, and a great cry seemed to go out from her heart towards the giver of it. The moment in which his eyes met hers seemed a supreme moment whose claims outweighed all the obligations of life, and was an existence in itself. She could not let go her hold on it. She could not come down from that height of satisfied emotion to the common path of duty again, could not resign herself to make or be made such a sacrifice, or submit to God's will, if that was indeed His will for her.

A hush of awe and compunction followed. The highest wave of passionate pain had flooded her struggling soul with that thought, and as it ebbed away, the dutiful instincts and habits that had always governed her reasserted themselves and proclaimed their mastery over passion. What was best for the others, not what would please herself, had always been her rule since very early days when she had first begun to take part in the cares of the straitened household, and gradually, through the surging of grief and pain, the old rule made itself heard again. It would be best for the others, if she came back with undivided interests, and gave herself wholly to share the struggle that was before them. He could not come into it—it would not be well for him to come into it because, Emmie decided sorrowfully, with keen remembrance of looks and words, he did not love her enough for that. She had pleased him for a moment at La Roquette, in the sunshine and among the flowers; but at home, with all the Saville Street household about her, and the work of the household pressing upon her, she could not be what he wanted. No; it was Alma he had preferred first. Alma was his real choice, and now

that she had come back to him, as Emmie's instinct told her she had, there was nothing for *her* to do but to step aside out of the sunshine of their lives. She would not be even a remorse to him, not so much shadow as that upon their path. She would let him know somehow or other that she understood him rightly, and that those words, that look exchanged on the hill-side, meant for her no more than he would wish them to mean, after seeing Alma again. She would do that, and whatever pain there might be in her heart, there should be no anger or grudging, and she need never feel humbled in her own eyes or before her mother, who would never dream of a woman loving more than she was loved.

The night had worn away by the time Emmie had come to this resolution, and a cold dawn was creeping into the sky. Cold, for they were nearing Paris now, and had left the golden sunshine, and warmth, and flowers of the South far behind them. Magic land and glamour and dreams of love had vanished, and the long dark night had brought her up into the pale familiar world of work-a-day life again. She hid her eyes from the faint yellow light, and the pale spring flowers that threatened to look hateful, and prayed, as she had never prayed before, for strength to make that sacrifice on which she had resolved, and to walk bravely henceforth in the thorny ways she knew.

Sir Francis, who woke up just as the prayer ended, hardly knew what to make of the countenance she turned towards him in answer to his sleepy exclamations. The gentle patience and sweetness on such a fair young face actually brought tears into his eyes, he found them so pathetic, and he patted her head affectionately after he had given her a morning kiss.

"That's right," he said, trying hard to find a pleasant topic to begin upon. "You have had a nice little sleep, I make no doubt, and so have I. It has done us both good, and here we are getting to the end of our night journey, and a cheerful sunny morning, which is always a comfort for the crossing, and for—hem—for the getting home and everything."

"For papa's funeral," said Emmie. "To-day, yes I remember you said it was to be to-day; we are hurrying

home for that," and she turned her head towards the window again, compunctious that she had been thinking so little of her father, and yet unable for all her good resolutions to help a little grudge against the feeble yellow sunshine, which her uncle called cheerful, and which to her seemed a mere mockery and pretence, light without glow, awakening her to days from which joy would be always wanting.

They stopped for two hours' rest in passing through Paris, and Emmie vindicated her right to be called woman in her uncle's opinion, by giving some unnecessary trouble on this last opportunity and risking the loss of the train to Calais.

When Sir Francis came to the door of the bedroom where he had sent her to lie down, he found her seated before a writing-table scattered over with sheets of paper, and busy sealing an envelope, which the waiter, to whom he had entrusted his letters, was waiting to take.

"My dear," he said, impatient for the first time, "we shall miss our train, and you are delaying my letters. Why did you trouble yourself to write? I had said all that was necessary."

"I am sorry," Emmie answered humbly; "but this" (holding up an envelope) "has a ring in it which I took away from La Roquette by mistake. It is a present intended for a girl in the village who is married to-day, and I thought I ought to send it back at once."

"Well, put on your wraps, there is not a minute to spare, and tell me meanwhile how to direct these other letters you are leaving on the table here."

"Never mind them, uncle; they are not intended to go anywhere, only sheets that I spoilt before I had finished."

Some of these stray sheets had only a few words scrawled on them, but the uppermost was signed, and had apparently been rejected only on account of two large tear blisters which disfigured the postscript.

As Sir Francis stood waiting till Emmie had repacked her writing-case and tied her hat, his eye ran over it, and he took in its contents without finding any other interest in what he read, than a faint surprise that Emmie should

occupy herself in writing such a commonplace little note at such a time.

"DEAR MR. ANSTICE,

"I brought away Madelon's ring by mistake yesterday, and I have just remembered that this is her wedding-morning. I am sorry she will not have it to wear at the marriage, and, as I think I remember that she was to leave La Roquette for a few days directly afterwards, I send the ring back to you that you may give it her when you see her again. Please don't say anything about me in giving it. She knows I wish her well, but it is not really my present, and I am thinking that it is not at all likely I should ever see her or La Roquette again.

"EMMIE WEST.

"P.S.—I took the branch of quince-blossom with me yesterday morning, but it died on the road."

The yellow sunshine did not continue to vex Emmie's eyes through the journey. About noon the sky clouded over, and when they entered London a soft drizzle of rain was falling, making the wet flags and sooty trees of the squares they drove through, dismally familiar. It might as well have been a November as a May afternoon for anything they saw, except when a basket of dank primroses, poised on the drenched bonnet of a flower-girl, was obtruded into the cab window. Yet the sense of familiarity was lost in a growing awe as the distance from Saville Street lessened.

Dr. Urquhart had met them at the station, and his black dress and the little sentences he let fall during the drive brought the facts of her father's death and that this was his funeral day, home to Emmie in a way they had hardly come before. She began to realise fully that there would be a face and figure less in the familiar house she was approaching, a face she had been used to see there all her life, on which her eyes would never fall again; and it shocked her to hear Dr. Urquhart speaking of this absence as of something to which everyone at home had already grown accustomed.

"Aubrey," he said, "had come from school and was to have a fortnight's holiday before he went back again, and Mrs. West had promised to take tea downstairs that evening. Miss Moore, too, was returning from Zürich and might arrive to-morrow. Mildred had written on her own responsibility to beg her to come home; nobody quite knew why, since she certainly would not be wanted now. The worst time was over; Dr. Urquhart said he ventured to hope. It had been a very sad time, but the house would brighten up, and everyone feel better when once Miss West was in her right place among them all again."

Emmie turned her head away rather petulantly when Dr. Urquhart said this. She meant, oh yes, she meant to get back into her old place, her right place, and do the best she could for them all, but he need not have said it with that smile of satisfaction lurking under his grave manner. It was not his place, she thought, with a little unreasonable anger, to hold up before her all the efforts she would have to make, and must begin to make, in another quarter of an hour. He need not have told her, at this overwhelming moment, that they all expected so much from her.

The hearse and the two carriages that were to follow it, were already standing before the door in Saville Street when the cab drove up, and the house was pervaded by the dreary bustle and solemn fuss that houses of mourning (even humble ones) cannot escape at such times.

Sir Francis felt greatly shocked when he perceived that the coffin was actually on its way downstairs as they entered the hall. It could not be helped. The afternoon was wearing away, and the undertaker's men were in a hurry and did not see why more time than was absolutely necessary should be given to such a poor show as this. Sir Francis would have drawn Emmie hastily into the dining-room to save her as much of the sad encounter as possible, but she gently resisted his intention.

"Let me," she pleaded, "let me go to meet it at the foot of the stairs. You know it is all of him I shall have seen, and I should like to say good-bye. I will not hinder the men more than a minute."

Casabianca and the Gentle Lamb had been out that morning and spent the last sixpence of Mr. Anstice's magnificent tip in buying at a little shop near, a dusty wreath of *immortelles* with "*Requiescat in Pace*" worked in black among the yellow flowers, to put upon the coffin. Emmie took two or three faded blossoms out of her bosom, and laid them in the centre of the wreath.

"Papa," she whispered, leaning her forehead against the black pall as if she were whispering to the still form inside, "I will give them to you. I will not keep them to look at and cry over. I never gave you anything I cared about very much before; but with these to take away with you, you will understand that I am glad you are resting, and that I will try to think of nothing but comforting mamma and working for the younger ones, now you are gone—of nothing else."

Mildred was waiting on the landing to seize upon Emmie as she came up, and she carried her straight to her mother's room. Mrs. West gave a cry of joy and held out her arms, and, for a little while at least, Emmie did succeed in forgetting everything else in the caresses and tender talk that followed. Certainly no one wanted her so much as these, no one else needed her greatly. The thought had a sting of pain in it just now, but that would pass, and by-and-by she should find in it the comfort and rest it surely ought to give her.

"Mother," Dr. Urquhart said that evening when all the bustle was over, and they were shut up in the drawing-room together; "well, mother, how do you think she is looking?"

"Very tired and out of heart, poor child."

"Yes, yes, that one expects; but, mother, did you see that she was wearing the cairngorm brooch to-day? I caught a glimpse of it when we were driving in the cab; and when she came in to say good-night to you I made sure you must have seen it."

"Yes, I saw it."

"Well" (a little impatiently), "well, mother?"

"Oh, I understand what you are wanting me to say, Graham, but you shall not frighten me. I don't see how

there can be a doubt about it, after such a journey; she is very much changed."

"Sweeter than ever—that's all."

"No, it is not all; you had better let me say out my thought. Yes, she struck me as very much changed. She went away a child, and she has come back a woman; and, Graham, my dear son, that does not happen in four months of a girl's life for nothing. Something has happened to alter her, to make her grow up all at once, and you have had nothing to do with it."

"How do you know that, mother? You are more observing than I in most cases, I allow, but perhaps in this one, my own experience of the past four months may teach me something. Are absence and suspense nothing to change one and make one grow rapidly older? Do you suppose that I have not been suffering? No, I am not imagining that she cares as I do; but even a little of what I have gone through lately would be enough to change any one. May it not be that?"

Mrs. Urquhart shook her head.

"If you ask me I must tell you the truth, and I don't think it is *that*. I don't believe she wears my brooch to-day because I gave it her, or because it has anything to do with you. She had forgotten that she had it on while she was talking to us."

"And you think someone else——"

"Nay, I did not say so; and now I wish I had held my tongue for to-night. We shall have time enough to judge before anything need be changed. You have quite decided that we take on the house for ourselves, and when it is ours they can fix a time for removal at their leisure; we shall be in no hurry to turn them out."

"Turn them out, mother!"

"Don't glare at me, Graham, as if I had said something preposterous. You can't imagine that I, who have gone through it all myself, would be hard on a widow and orphans! Mrs. West, poor thing, would be welcome to live in this house all the rest of her life as far as I am concerned, but she and her children must have their choice. The hardest thing of all sometimes is to force on helpless people obligations that they are perhaps

wanting to escape from. You would not like Emmie to be driven into a corner and be obliged to take *you* whether she is ready for it or not, to put a roof over her mother's and brothers' and sister's heads?"

"Mother, you drive me wild with such a suggestion."

"It is a very obvious one, however, my dear Graham, and must occur to every one directly you begin to talk of the whole family living on here permanently in your house. I only made it to show you the folly of rushing upon rash acts of generosity. If you want to be of real service, and to win Emmie round, you must let things take their natural course for a while, and wait patiently."

"Wait, and let the someone else you hint at win her from me. I had no idea you could be so unreasonable, mother; and all the while I am certain you are misjudging her, and that she put on the brooch to show——" but his voice grew shaky and he stopped.

"I wish we had not begun to talk to-night," said Mrs. Urquhart, penitently. "It has been a trying day, and we are both over-excited, and, I'm sorry to say, Graham, quite a pile of notes and letters have accumulated on your desk since morning. You had better go and look them over and calm yourself. As I said before, we have plenty of time. The question of moving will hardly suggest itself till the end of the quarter; we can let everything stand over till then, at all events."

Stand over! Dr. Urquhart walked off to his writing-table and his letters, convinced, as he had never felt before, that his mother was indeed getting old, and losing the power of estimating the great events of life reasonably. She could plunge such a sword as that in his heart, could hint that Emmie's heart was preoccupied, and that at best she might be won round to take him as a *pis aller*, and she could then take up her knitting and advise him to go away and calm himself.

"Evidently," he thought bitterly, "it was not a matter of life or death to her; it would not make her world come to an end, if Emmie West slipped out of their lives altogether. She had even forgotten that such things ever were matters of life or death, on which all the world worth living for, hung."

As Dr. Urquhart broke open his notes, and read complaints and summonses from his patients to come and cure them, he doubted, for the first time in his life, of the dignity of a profession whose aim was to enable human creatures to live long enough to arrive at such a miserable state of apathy.

The effort of writing answers and planning the next day's work did him good, however, and so far mollified his feelings towards his mother, that when he came out from behind his curtain, he was glad to see her still sitting by the fire. His confidence had all died out now, and given place to a burning indignation against the individual, a worthless idler, no doubt, who had been playing with Emmie's heart, and spoiling it for him, while he had been working so hard to deserve her, and he wanted to have his faith in himself and her, restored by another argument.

Mrs. Urquhart had waited for a last word, but her conscience would not let it be a concession to hope about Emmie.

"My dear Graham," she began, pointing to a page of her open Bible, "will you just look and see if the date written against that verse is in your father's handwriting? Ah yes, I thought so. We were reading here on the day of the last of those funerals before you were born, which emptied our house of all our little ones, and he marked it that I might remember. It's the answer of the Father in the parable to the eldest son: 'All that I have is thine.' I was in a very rebellious mood that night, not so much on my own account as on his, for he, I thought, deserved blessings if anyone did. He had been always diligent in the Father's service, and was he to have nothing of his own while other people, mere squanderers, had presents every day, calves and kids, and mirth with their friends? I broke out with this to him, and he just pointed to that 'all,' and asked me if I did not think that *all* was better than a part. Gifts, something for oneself, are all very well for a time, he said, but still they are only a portion of the Father's wealth, and we do not give portions to those who are nearest us. The higher lot is surely to be let into possession of the 'all,' and have it, as the Father

has it, in all. Not single gifts, but the root of joy, as it dwells in the Father, and so to be 'always with Him,' whatever happens. Yes, Graham, I know it is difficult to see things that way. One does not get into the first class in the school of the kingdom all at once, and for a long time the single gifts seem far the sweetest. Even the eldest son here, you see, did not understand what it was his Father had given him, but he was the eldest son, and he could not be robbed of his birthright, and allowed to be satisfied with a little, instead of all. I don't say one can help grudging sometimes, but if we could get rightly into our minds that success in getting what one wants is not always a mark of the highest favour—that there is something we can enter into beyond gifts—we should be less tempted to be angry when things go against our will. Don't you think so?"

Graham did not answer; his mother did not expect him to speak. It was not his way to let himself be drawn into talk of this kind. She was quite content that he stood behind her in silence for a few minutes, and that when she got up to go to bed, he took the book from her and said:

"I think I will look at that date in my father's handwriting once more, if you don't mind leaving it with me for to-night."

CHAPTER XXIX.

SUSPENSE.

As music and splendour
Survive not the lamp and the lute,
The heart's echoes render
No song when the spirit is mute—
No song but sad dirges,
Like the wind through a ruined cell,
Or the mournful surges
That ring the dead seaman's knell.

It is a common remark that the people who get the most pity are not the chief sufferers; and it might be added as a parallel truism, that the pity, when it is bestowed, is seldom given for what the sufferers know to be their

most pressing cause of sorrow. Our bitterest tears, our worst moments of pain, are so often given to complaints that have too much barefaced self-love in them to be presented before our critical fellow-creatures, or to be recognised quite nakedly by our own minds, even while we allow them in secret to draw tears of gall from our eyes. During the weeks that followed her father's funeral, it often troubled Emmie's conscience that she got credit for finer feelings than she deserved; and that the people about her would set down her silence and quietness and inability to share the outbursts of returning cheerfulness, that soon came to the other young ones, to the score of a deeper sorrow for the common loss, than her brothers and sisters felt.

Mildred, who had been grave and sad enough at first, was capable of being quite elated before the end of the week, over a legacy of old blank books, invaluable for scribbling her compositions, which Mary Ann turned out of one of her father's drawers. Even Harry gradually fell into his old ways, ran upstairs two steps at a time on the afternoon when he brought home the welcome news of his appointment as clerk in a new firm, to which Dr. Urquhart had introduced him, hummed a tune when he shouldered Katherine Moore's box, to carry it to "Air Throne" for the last time, and had a wrestling match with Casabianca on the evening before the latter went back to school. By degrees the old noises crept back into the silent house. The buzz and hum of active life began again with only one or two notes wanting, notes which, however, to some ears in the house made all the difference between dissonance and music in the tune wherewith Time was playing out those early summer days.

Dr. Urquhart was one of the dissatisfied people, though he had apparently less cause to complain than anybody else, for the sounds he had hungered for during the last three months were in the house again, and met his ears as frequently as ever. He used to put down his pen two or three times in the evening, as had been his wont, to listen for Emmie's footsteps on the stairs, or her voice hushing Sidney and the Gentle Lamb when the school-room door opened below, and the old uproar again threatened to invade the drawing-room. No one could

say that Emmie was not as nimble as ever in running up and down on everybody's errands, or that she neglected her post among the younger ones of the family in the evening; and yet, when the sounds he had listened for, ceased, Dr. Urquhart turned to his work with an impatient sigh, instead of the satisfied smile that used to provoke his mother. There was a semi-tone wanting—a spring of hope in the footsteps, a happy ring in the voice—that spoiled all the music to him. Perhaps only a lover who had taken it into his head to measure his own hopes by such symptoms as these, could have detected their absence, for Mrs. West was well content with her daughter's state of spirits, and believed that Emmie had brought as much sunshine back into the house as could be expected, or was desirable, under the circumstances.

Emmie herself hoped fervently that people would soon leave off taking any particular notice of her, as nothing ever made her feel so much ashamed of herself as those looks of commiseration for a wrong cause. She was quite grateful to her mother for not observing the red rims round her eyes in the mornings, and she comforted herself with the belief that no one in the family, except perhaps Mildie, was at all aware of the fits of restlessness that seized her about post-time, and forced her to rush out into the hall and search the contents of the letter-box for a direction in Alma's handwriting, or for that possible reply to her Paris letter, whose chances of coming late, or early, or never at all, she blamed herself for calculating so incessantly.

When Sir Francis Rivers came, as he did for a hasty minute once or twice a week, to ask after Mrs. West and talk over business with Harry, Emmie was nervous about the sound of her own voice when she spoke to him. She quite hated the sharp, forced notes her ear detected in it whenever she brought out an inquiry after the travellers in the Basses Alpes; though, as she told herself, it would have been positively unnatural if she had shown no curiosity, and she had carefully considered every word beforehand, so that it should be no more and no less eager than became the occasion. She tried not to fancy that her uncle hurried

over his answers, and put her off with merely vague news; and yet more and more, as time passed on, a conviction grew upon her that, for some reason or other, Sir Francis did not like to talk about his wife's and daughter's doings just then, and that a kind of embarrassment came over him whenever the topic was brought up. Was it embarrassment, or was it only caution that laid a weight on his usually careless speech?

Emmie, who watched his face as closely as she dared, could not quite make this out. He smiled sometimes to himself, and his eyes twinkled, but, to Emmie's ear, there was a doubtful, nay, an ashamed sound in the tattoo which he generally beat loud with the fingers of one hand on the knuckles of the other, as he cut short his replies. "Ah, yes, yes, it has been a successful journey. Your aunt writes in much improved spirits." "And Alma?" "Alma does not write. It is your aunt who tells all the news there is to tell this time. I suppose I shall hear from Alma herself by-and-by." Or later: "Yes, they are quite well. They have gone on to Geneva, I heard this morning."

"So soon," said Emmie, in a breathless voice. "Then they have paid Madame de Florimel a very short visit at Château Arnaud. She invited us—my aunt, I mean, for a month."

"Well, I can't quite make it out. Perhaps your aunt found it lonely up there in the mountains, or perhaps she and Madame de Florimel did not quite hit it off—two old ladies shut up together in an old castle on a rock, what could they do but come to blows? At all events, your aunt took the travelling-carriage on to Geneva, and I think, all things considered, she and Alma had better stay there for the present till matters arrange themselves a little."

Emmie left off asking questions after that; but one day, a week later, Mrs. West—who had come downstairs to talk over Dr. Urquhart's offer about the house with Sir Francis and Harry—detained Sir Francis when the business discussion was over to ask after her sister's health, and in talking to her he grew more communicative than he had been before. Emmie felt thankful, more thankful than any one ever knew, that she was standing with

her back to the speakers, so that no one could see how she looked while that conversation went on; and above all, she congratulated herself on the chance which brought Katherine Moore into the room, with a letter she wanted Harry to post, just as Sir Francis rose to take leave, for it was his two or three last sentences that overpowered her most nearly, and obliged her for a single second to put her hand on the chimney-piece, to still her trembling.

"Oh, by-the-way," he began, turning back from the door at which Katherine was entering, "I meant to tell you that I parted with a friend of Emmie's who desired to be remembered to her, or something of that kind, just at your door. I would not let him come in, as I had really only one spare half-hour to settle this business in, or he could have given you full particulars of the mountain journey, for he was with them all the time. Emmie will guess whom I mean—young Anstice. I had not seen him since his return to England till to-day. He hurried off at once to Scotland to Mrs. Anstice, and he has been very busy ever since bringing the poor woman back to Leigh, and arranging about her son's funeral, for the body was washed ashore five or six days after the accident. What accident, do you say? Why, have not you heard? Ah! I beg your pardon, how should you have heard; it would hardly interest you just now, but to us—as an old friend of Frank's—but I had better keep to the point. Young Anstice, whom Emmie knows, has lately come into possession of an earldom and a large property by the death of a cousin. The news reached him while he was travelling with my wife and Alma, and was, of course, a great surprise to them all. The poor young fellow who was drowned, was quite a lad. We knew him a little; he was at Constance's wedding; but it is the present Lord Anstice who was always a favourite with our young folks."

Emmie took her hand from the chimney-piece and steadied herself. If people would always for the future call him *that*, she need not be afraid of hearing him spoken of. She could bear to hear that name very well. It seemed to put La Roquette and their six weeks' intimacy very far away indeed, and even to give back to her remembrance unproved, the Wynyard

Anstice whom no one would henceforth think or speak about in the old familiar way. She could have nothing to do with this new personage, or be tempted even to dream of disputing him with Alma. It was all over now, of course, and that little bit of his life at La Roquette when he was only madame's relation, and could talk of the mountain farm as a great inheritance, would be wiped out of everybody's thoughts but hers, and might be her possession still.

"Mr. Anstice. I remember him," Mrs. West was now saying, in a tone of gentle indifference. "We saw him several times last winter, and he seemed to take quite a liking to dear Aubrey. I am sure I am very glad he has come into a great fortune."

Sir Francis suddenly remembered that he was in a hurry, and bustled out of the room with a hasty apology for brushing past Katherine Moore, who had paused in her talk with Harry West at the first mention of Mr. Anstice's name, and who now stood transfixed in the doorway, too much occupied with some thought of her own to notice his impatience. Emmie need not have been afraid of her own agitation being observed by any one, for it was Katherine's white face and startled expression that attracted Harry's and Mildie's wondering eyes towards her. She made an effort in a minute to recover herself, and boldly spoke out the thought she felt sure must have occurred to their minds as well as to her own.

"Anstice is a family name," she said, consideringly; "two or three families of cousins might well bear it. There is really no reason to suppose that the young nobleman, whose death in Scotland Sir Francis has just mentioned, has ever been seen by any of us. Christabel's acquaintance and mine must be an altogether different person. I really don't know why I thought about him just then."

"It's easily found out," said Harry.

"As you please," Katherine answered. "One naturally feels more interest in a person one has seen even once or twice than in a total stranger; and that Mr. Anstice was certainly kind in inquiring frequently for me after my accident, and seems also to have shown

some attention to Christabel while I was away. As the notion has occurred to us all, I think I should like you to find out the truth about it, and to let me know if you can."

The proud guarded tone was assumed rather to spare herself than in any way to deceive them. From the first hour of her return to Saville Street, in compliance with Mildred's telegram, Katherine guessed that it had been on Christabel's behalf rather than on their own, that the young Wests had wished for her presence in the house, and she felt sure that their uneasiness was founded on observations of facts to which she was a stranger; but miserable as had been the suspense of the last fortnight, Katherine had not yet brought herself to the pass of seeking information about Christabel's doings or feelings from any one but herself. She felt so sure each morning when she got up, that the anticipated burst of confidence which would restore their sundered souls to each other must come before another sunset, that she let the time slip by, day after day, unable to take a step that would make the hour of reconciliation less perfect when it came. "How," she asked herself, "would she succeed in comforting Christabel when she turned to her in an abandonment of renewed confidence, if she had to confess that she had allowed any stranger to interfere between them, during the terrible eclipse of trust and love into which somehow or other they had wandered?"

There was no one in the house on whom the sense of change pressed so crushingly as on Katherine; but till within the last day or two she had been trying to struggle against it, as in a half-sleep one struggles to throw off an oppressive nightmare. Could it be anything but a frightful nightmare dream that she and Christabel had met again after their first separation, and were no longer the same to each other as they had been; could not get near to each other for some indefinite, but yet impenetrable barrier that every moment of the day and night kept them asunder? For some time after her return, Katherine fought bravely to keep this conviction out. She met Christabel's wandering looks with cheerful confident smiles. "I am here," she seemed always by every look and gesture to answer to the strange

yearning in Christabel's eyes. "I am here; what are you waiting for? Let us begin our happy life together again!" She could not help a little impatience, a little angry disappointment creeping in, when, in spite of her presence and her watchful kindness, the wistful look grew and grew, and intensified to agony as the days passed on, till Christabel's whole soul seemed to have gone out in yearning expectation towards something unknown, leaving for Katherine only a dead blank. Katherine's pride as well as her love was wounded at last, but alarmed pride was another safeguard for silence, another barrier against letting anyone know what she suffered. If Christabel could not trust her, she would be none the less a faithful guardian to keep the trouble, whatever it might be, from being pryed upon by any less sympathising eyes than her own. The letter she had just brought downstairs was addressed to her friend Miss Douglas, at Zürich, and contained a resignation of her post as her secretary, giving as her reason that she found it impossible to persuade her sister to accompany her to Switzerland, and that she could not leave her alone just now when their old place of shelter was being broken up.

It had cost Katherine a sore struggle to write this letter. The half-hour given to its composition was perhaps the darkest and bitterest of her whole life—the time when the sense of defeat and failure entered into her very soul, and flooded it with dark waters of doubt and discouragement. And amid all the solid causes for regret arising from this decision, the thought that she was, for the first time in her life, writing an important letter without having talked out the matter confidentially with her sister, kept recurring, as, after all, the chief sorrow, the crowning point of desolation. She was sacrificing all her hopes in life to a whim of her sister's, and Christabel had not even taken the trouble to understand what she was doing—could not be brought to give her mind long enough to see the injury her selfishness would inflict on the person she professed to love above all things. Katherine had made an appeal to her only that morning, and had tried to rouse her by showing her the folly of lingering in London till Miss Douglas had been driven to engage another secretary, or, if her patience held out,

till their slender funds were exhausted, and it was no longer in their power to choose what they would do.

For a little while Katherine thought that Christabel was for once listening and being affected by her words. A shade of colour and emotion came into her face, which, with the exception of the hungry eyes, seemed lately to have stiffened into the semblance of a stone mask. She lifted her head, and every now and then her lips moved as if she were going to speak—yes, surely to speak out—to pour forth all the pent-up confidence at last. Surely she is touched at the thought of Katherine's anxiety—frightened, perhaps, as it dawns upon her that her obstinacy has risked so much that is of life or death moment to her sister. Gradually the regular noiseless motion of her lips and the turn of her head dispelled these hopes, and Katherine discovered that Christabel was not listening to a word she said. She was counting the approaching sounds of the postman's knocks in his progress down the street. It was in proportion as this sound came nearer and nearer that colour and emotion grew into her face. The interest she was showing had nothing whatever to do with Katherine's pleadings. When the postman reached the next door but one, while tears of indignation were starting to Katherine's eyes, Christabel put up her hand to feel for something she wore under her dress, and a faint dreamy smile flitted across her face, the shadow of one of her old smiles, never seen now, but when she was listening for the postman. Katherine turned away at the sight to wipe her own burning tears, and did not observe how instantly the smile faded and how the hungry eyes darkened and grew for a moment wild with agony, when there was a longer pause than usual, and the next knock came on a door lower down in the street. That watching of all the London postal deliveries had now gone on increasing daily in intensity for three weeks, and it bewildered and scandalised Katherine too much to allow her to feel very compassionate towards the constantly-recurring disappointment. She thought she could not have remained dumbly expectant, letting all other interests and aims in life fall away from her, for any love, for any personal desire whatsoever. It was such a contradiction to all

their past hopes, such a downfall. If, after all, a woman like Christabel could be turned away from the aims in life she had set before herself by an idle fancy, by some poor unreal sentiment, then perhaps the battle she had thrown herself into, was not worth fighting, and she need not so very bitterly regret the fate that obliged her to confess herself defeated at the very outset.

It was in this mood she had written to Miss Douglas, and it returned upon her with fresh force when she got back to "Air Throne," and, finding it empty, sat down at Christabel's easel to finish the drawing of a wall-paper pattern, which had been left untouched so long that an active "Air Throne" spider had spun a web from corner to corner of the drawing-board. Very melancholy thoughts possessed her, as her fingers half mechanically deepened the faintly-outlined curves and leaves of the pattern, and she was forced to pause every now and then in her work because the gathering mists in her eyes hindered her from seeing clearly. Sometimes it was a bright recollection of "Air Throne," as it had looked last year, that nearly overcame her, and sometimes a dreary vision of the future, challenged her to face it and say if it was not to that or something like that they were surely drifting. She saw herself toiling on without the high hopes that had hitherto given her such an untiring appetite for work. She saw Christabel indifferent and preoccupied, falling further and further away from her under some alien, nay, perhaps, degrading influence; she saw them both sinking into great straits of poverty till their lives became like the lives of so many solitary working-women, a dire daily struggle for the means of living, and for nothing beyond that—they who had set out so proudly.

Katherine allowed her hands to fall idly into her lap, feeling too spiritless even for the mechanical task she had set herself, till she heard Christabel's steps reascending the attic stairs, and then she again took up her pencil and began to draw. It might perhaps, she thought, rouse Christabel to some sense of shame for her long idleness, if, on coming into the room, she saw the easel drawn into its old place by the window again, and her sister employed in finishing her neglected work. For a moment Katherine hoped that her little device was suc-

cessful, for Christabel walked straight up to the easel and, standing behind her, put a hand on her shoulder. Evidently she is preparing to speak, but anxious not to be looked at while she begins the long-delayed communication; at last it is coming then—at last she will break the long silence. Something has moved her, and she will explain her strange conduct and throw herself on her sister's indulgence at last.

"Katherine, did you hear anything when you were downstairs, about—about—Mr. Anstice?" Christabel's dry lips murmured in a hoarse whisper close to Katherine's ear. "They were talking about him just now, as I passed the downstairs sitting-room—Harry and Mildred—for I heard his name, and they cannot know anything about him more than I do. You must go down and find out for me what they are saying. They have no right to have heard anything about him when I have not. It cannot concern them, you know."

"Nor us," said Katherine, coldly, "as far as I understand; it has never been our habit to trouble ourselves about common acquaintance who do not seek us. We have other work on our hands, and I should be ashamed of asking such a question of Harry and Mildie."

She was half vexed with herself for answering so coldly; but the question, coming just when she had hoped for something else, had been a great disappointment, and in resuming her work she had suddenly discovered that the pattern traced on the board was composed of an endless interlacing of four letters—C and M and R and A—now disposed so as to outline two hands joined at the finger-tips, and now a double flower, and now two hearts enclosed in a lily-cup. The discovery did not dispose her to listen calmly to questions about Raphael Anstice just then; and when, after a few moments' silence, Christabel stooped down imploringly and touched Katherine's cheek with her hot lips, in the first voluntary caress she had offered since her return, Katherine turned away her face irresponsive. With those intertwined letters before her eyes, revealing, as she felt they did, much in her sister's life of which she had been kept in ignorance, the caress seemed a Judas kiss—a kiss of betrayal. A faint moan, such as a

wounded animal struck by a careless hand might have given, fell on Katherine's ear and grieved without melting her. The suffering seemed so exaggerated, as well as so misapplied, while there were plenty of nearer troubles to grieve over which Christabel was bringing on herself, that she could not pity it as perhaps it deserved to be pitied. She felt like a block of ice, and had an instinct that the delayed confidence had better not come at this moment, for she could be cruel towards a confession of love-folly to-day.

Finding no response, Christabel turned from the easel and began to pace up and down the room. Katherine's rejection of her caress startled her. During the past anxious days, while hour by hour she had been expecting news of her husband, and finding instead a strange baffling silence growing round her, Katherine's presence in the house had given her a certain comfort, and it had not occurred to her as a very important matter that her own conduct should remain unexplained so long. She was only waiting, and at any moment the necessity for silence might end. He would come back to her, or the answer she was expecting to her letters would be put into her hands, and would sanction her sharing the joy it would give her with Katherine. Intense, overwhelming anxiety had blotted out her remorse for her conduct to her sister, and she had been turning in her agony to thoughts of the old love as the one solid bit of ground left for her existence to rest upon. The action that denied her the touch of Katherine's cheek was as the crumbling of the universe round her—a crack of doom. She could not get her thoughts coherently enough even to complain or remonstrate aloud. Katherine would not kiss her; Katherine, like everything else, was vanishing from her into the darkness thickening round her hour by hour. Was it "Air Throne" in which she was walking—was that her easel at which Katherine sat with the drawing upon it she began to trace, surely not so long ago, when *he* stood by, applauding her devices?

Whenever Christabel's back was turned, Katherine looked up wistfully from her work and watched her till she reached the end of the room, but she avoided seeing her face, and looked down on the board whenever

Christabel's eyes were on her. It was one of those terrible duels of silence which people who love each other very much fight sometimes to the infinite wounding of their own souls. If they speak, they know they must utter words of reproach that can never afterwards be forgotten—for what reproach is so keen as the reproach of intimate love—or throw themselves with entire abandonment on each other's hearts. Unready for either course, a dumb, awful suffering holds them in suspense, building up a wall between them that each moment seems more insurmountable. If it had not been for those intertwined C-M's, and R-A's before her eyes, Katherine would have given in; but the sight of them as they revealed themselves again and again in every curve of the pattern she was tracing, steeled her heart and warned her away from speech. Contempt for the infatuation that had found pleasure in expressing itself so aimlessly, would have forced itself out, if she had allowed words to come.

It grew too dark to draw while the cruel silence lasted; and Katherine, glad to escape what was becoming intolerable, pushed away the easel, and, taking down her bonnet and cloak from the wall, got ready to go out. She had long had it in her mind to visit David Macvie, whom she had not seen since her return, and now a half-formed resolution to take him into her confidence and consult him about her fears, gave a new interest to her project. Christabel stood still and watched Katherine's preparations, in a frightened silence. To her highly-wrought mood it seemed that if Katherine went out without speaking to her, it would be a sign that she was irrevocably offended and would never love her again as she used to do. She had no doubt discovered all her deceit and weakness, and found it quite contemptible, quite unpardonable, as perhaps he, too, did when, in absence, he saw it in its true colours. When Katherine's hand was on the door, she started forward, and laid hold of her dress to keep her back.

"Don't go!" she cried. "Oh, Katherine, I want you. It is getting dark; I want you to stay at home."

The voice sounded sharp and fretful, like the voice of a spoilt child, and Katherine felt really annoyed, and for the first time ashamed of her sister.

"I have been waiting for nearly an hour for you to begin to speak to me," she said, coldly, "and now I really must go out, and you had better keep what you have got to say till I come back, when we shall both be in a better mood for it, perhaps. It is absolutely necessary for one of us to work. If you won't rouse yourself and attend to the ordinary affairs of life I must."

Christabel stood for a moment looking intently in Katherine's face, and then throwing the dress she held from her with a gesture which Katherine took for anger, but which was in reality despair, she turned her back upon her, flung herself in the chair by the easel and hid her face. She had read contempt in Katherine's eyes, and she felt all was over for her. If Katherine despised her; if the love that had hitherto been indulgence itself to her, condemned her, then there was indeed nothing more to hope from anyone else.

Katherine lingered a while, and then went out. She had been used to say that it was quite impossible for herself and Christabel to quarrel, and this old boast came back with a sharp sting into her mind during her solitary walk. She felt, that to people who loved each other as they two had loved, small beginnings of discord, a rejected kiss, or a delayed confidence, were more deadly injuries to affection than taunts and reproaches where the bond had been less perfect. Could such things, between such lovers as they, having once occurred, be ever so completely forgotten—as that the former fearless trust could be restored. Remorse soon drove out the short-lived anger; yet Katherine did not hasten back to the house. On the contrary, she lengthened out the small pieces of business she had determined on carrying through; and when she reached David's shop, long after dark, and found him out, she asked permission to wait in the little back sitting-room till his return. It was a new thing to her to linger abroad, because she dreaded what awaited her at home, and a reluctance to go back unprepared for what she might have to hear, grew upon her, as she sat listening to the clocks, in the little room Christabel used to describe so gaily a year ago. She felt half afraid that Christabel might take her long absence for a sign of resentment, yet she could not

make up her mind to go away without giving herself the chance of hearing something from David that would enlighten her perplexities.

CHAPTER XXX.

CHRISTABEL.

Ach neige,
Du schmerzenreiche
Dein Antliss gnädig meiner Noth.

CHRISTABEL did not uncover her face for long after Katherine left the room. She heard the door close, and listening to the footsteps along the passage and down the creaking attic stairs, each step hurt her as if it had been made upon her heart; and her heart responded with a dull throb of yearning after something that was receding from her to a great, great distance. She had said to herself, when she covered her eyes, that she would never meet that look of contempt in Katherine's again—never, it would kill her. Since the dawn of self-consciousness, she had been used to think of herself in accordance with Katherine's thought of her, to see herself clothed in Katherine's love and good opinion; and now contempt from her seemed to make life impossible. Before the echo of Katherine's last footstep had died on her ear, she had settled it with herself that she would not see her sister again, till she could come with her husband by her side, to tell the whole truth and plead for forgiveness. He would explain and excuse their conduct to Katherine, for had he not conquered her own scruples, and was it not his business now to defend her? The long suspense and intense concentration of all her thoughts on one subject had weakened Christabel's brain; so that she could no longer think clearly, or understand the real difficulties of her position. All other considerations receded into the background, before dismay at the bewildering spell of silence that seemed to have fallen upon her from the moment she returned to Saville Street, a happy bride,—

as she had believed herself then,—parted only for a little while from her husband.

For the first week after her return, the letters sent to the address her husband had given her, were happy trustful letters, full of details of all that was happening in the West family, interspersed here and there with more personal matters, with deeper thoughts, and tenderer fancies, than she perhaps would have found courage to speak, if her husband had been by her side. It was very strange and sweet to her to be opening up to him these innermost recesses of her heart and mind, which no one but Katherine had ever looked into before, and which some latent fear of meeting an irresponsive look had closed from him hitherto. Her three weeks' husband had a right to know everything about her now; and these mind-revelations so absorbed Christabel for a day or two, and so fully occupied all the time that was not needed by the Wests in their trouble, that her longing for answers to her letters did not go beyond a very bearable pain. She knew that both her letters and her husband's replies passed through an intermediate hand, and in the hurry of their parting, she had forgotten to inquire how long their transmission would take.

For a little while she had stilled her disappointment each day, by picturing the rich feast that would come by-and-by. But when once she began to realise the strangeness of the long silence, her anxiety for news became almost maddening. Hour by hour, minute by minute, she felt as if another atom was added to the load of dread suspense, another grain of sand thrown down on the heap of accumulated silent hours, that put the hope of ever hearing further away, and seemed to build a wall of helplessness about her. The task of writing her own daily letter, that had begun by being such a delight, changed gradually to the worst torture of all. She had made every appeal she could think of, urged every plea, implored for a word—an angry word even, rather than silence—and it had been like crying out into thick darkness, and getting back not even an echo of her own passionate entreaties. A sense of humiliation came with the repetition of this urgency. It was the first time in

her life that she had begged for a word from anyone, and nothing but the maddening of suspense could have brought her to plead so long for notice that was withheld. At last her letters dwindled down to a word or two each day which changed in tone as, at the moment of writing, hope, or dread, or short-lived resentment had the upper hand in her tempest-tossed soul. And now for three days she had not written at all. A numbness, the result of intense suffering, was stealing over her, and for three days she had been flattering herself that if she kept quite quiet, if she left off questioning even with herself, or accusing her husband of unkindness in her thoughts, the explanation she was hungering for, would come as the reward of her patience. They had spoken together about patient Grizell once, when she was drawing some illustrations for a volume of Chaucer's poems, and they had had an argument about the rightfulness of the wife's yielding so much to her husband's will, he having, all the while (as she knew), the question of her yielding to his wish for concealment uppermost in his mind. It had apparently been a playful word struggle, but each knew that thoughts of deepest import to them both underlay their argument, and in the end she had yielded. Perhaps with a too reluctant acquiescence to satisfy him, she thought now, and he was trying her further, preparing her, in the fashion in which Grizell was prepared, for that joyful revelation, at which he had been so fond of hinting mysteriously while they were together.

For three days Christabel had been trying to put her agony to sleep with this fancy, and when Katherine talked about their removal to Zürich, her words sounded quite idle and meaningless. She could not give her mind to such a question, when perhaps the postman on his road down the street, held in his hand the glad reprieve that would be the end of all care. If her husband had said to himself that he would wait to write till she had left off urging him, surely, he would think the patience of three days enough proof of submission. He never waited three days, she remembered, when she used to urge upon him not to call too often in Saville Street; and oh, how grateful he had once been to her,

for acknowledging that she had found the time long when they had missed each other on two successive mornings in her walk to her work.

The shock she received from hearing the name of Anstice spoken in mysterious tones downstairs, and from Katherine's manner of receiving her first attempt at confidence, startled her from this dreaming to a sudden realisation of the true facts of the case. When once she had admitted the possibility of putting an end to the suspense herself, she could not bear to let the thought go again. If he accused her, when they met, of taking it upon herself too soon to act against his wishes, she could make him understand what an eternity the three weeks' suspension of all intercourse had been to her. She could go back and recount to him each day's history, and show the wound which the striking of every hour in it had made in her heart. The project that had occurred to her as most likely to relieve her anxiety quickly, was to make a journey to the little northern town to which she had been told to send her letters, and to inquire at the address given her there as to whether such letters had been received and sent on, and whether any answers awaited her. She knew the place, for she had spent a day and a night there with her husband, and it was at that time that he had nearly told her his secret. She forced herself now to recall the stages of their homeward journey, and calculated the probable expense of a railway ticket; and then she took out from the drawer of her writing-desk the little purse she had used on her journey. Fortunatus's purse, which her husband had filled for the last time when they parted, and she emptied the coins it contained into her lap to see if there was enough for her purpose. Yes, there was enough—more than enough. She was richer than she thought, for she had put away the purse on the evening of her return without examining it, and had not had the heart to look at it since. As she put the money back again, she calculated that she might even go on to Scotland, if her first attempt at getting news failed. Yet it could not quite fail; she must surely, on the spot to which her letters had gone, gather some tidings to account for the delay. Merely to question a person who

was in direct communication with him, and could be made to answer her with a living voice and thus break the horrible spell of silence, seemed, just then to Christabel, motive enough for the journey. At the worst, it was escape from Katherine's eyes, from the agony of counting the postman's knocks through another day, while Katherine watched her coldly, and thought contemptuously of her folly.

The prospect of immediate action comforted her so much that she was able to write a coherent note to her sister, telling her where she was going, and promising further explanation of her conduct in a day or two; and then she put up a few clothes in a hand-bag and got herself ready for the journey. She shut the attic windows while busy about her preparations, to keep out the sound of the late postman's knocks on the neighbouring street-doors, for she was determined not to prepare another disappointment for herself, now, when all suspense would soon be over; but just as she was leaving her room, the sound to which her ears had become abnormally sensitive, reached her. Her heart gave a great bound as usual, and she was obliged to lean against the doorpost for an instant, once more startled into concentrating her entire being into an act of strained attention, into feeling as if her whole body had become a throbbing, listening ear. This time the sounds came in the succession she had imagined so often, that she could hardly believe in their reality now. A loud knock at their door; steps in the hall of someone coming to search the letter-box; a lengthened rustle as if some larger packet than usual were being abstracted; then quick footfalls mounted the stairs higher and higher, past the Land of Beulah, past Emmie's bedroom door, on to the creaking attic staircase:—it was Mildie who was coming up, and Christabel, reassured and courageous, went forward to meet her.

"Here," she said, cheerfully, "here is the letter you have been expecting so long. See what a thick one to make up for the long delay. I am very glad it has come, for I began to think that a craze for expecting letters that were never coming, had got into the house. Here is yours, at all events."

Mildie had the consideration to run away when she had fulfilled her errand, and Christabel walked back to "Air Throne" with the thick packet in her hand. It was too dark in the passage to read the address on the cover, and she was not in any hurry; only one person in the world would send her a thick letter like this. She was glad to take a minute or two to rest her mind in the sweet certainty of relief, of actually holding what she had longed for, in her hand, before the intense moment came of opening the cover, seeing the familiar handwriting, and devouring his very words.

The light from the window only showed her the Thorpe Leigh postmark and an unknown hand on the cover; that she expected, for she had understood the letters were to pass through an intermediate hand, and this budget must contain the accumulation of all he had written during the past long weeks, detained in someone's careless custody. Would that someone's neglect ever be pardoned when her husband knew what it had cost her, that it had even made her, now and then for a moment or two, doubt his love? Christabel could afford to call it a moment or two, and to smile pityingly at herself as she lighted the lamp, and then settled herself by the table to enjoy her feast.

A number of letters fell out as she tore off the cover. She picked one up, and then another, and threw them down with a terrible sense of bewilderment. They were her own letters; some of them had evidently been read, but the greater part remained in sealed covers. When she had glanced through the first to find some mark or written word that might throw light on the mystery, she tore off the unbroken envelopes and drew forth still other and other sheets, scattering them about and searching wildly for some writing not her own, for a page that did not return her tender or entreating words mockingly to her strained eyeballs. At last she found a sheet written only on one side in a clear, round hand, which made the words easy to decipher, while their meaning floated over her brain in a thick cloud of utter bewilderment, part of a puzzle to which as yet Christabel had found no clue.

"The lady who has been in the habit of writing to

the late Lord Anstice under the name of Ralph Anstice, Esq., is requested not to send any more letters to the Lodge, Thorpe Leigh. The enclosed, most of which reached Thorpe Leigh after the news of his lordship's lamented death had been received there, came into our hands a few days ago, and the writer is assured that so much only of their contents has been examined as was necessary for their safe return into her possession. If Miss Moore wishes for further information on any point connected with Lord Anstice's decease, or has any communication to make to his solicitors, she is to communicate with the address in London given above. A newspaper containing an account of Lord Anstice's death, and one with a notice of his interment in the mausoleum at Thorpe Leigh, will be forwarded per next post."

Christabel read this letter twice through, and then sprang to her feet again; the thought which had been prominent in her mind before she received this packet, recurred vividly. She would not accept *this* as the end of her anxiety; it was all some wild mistake, a plot to keep her and her letters from him. He could not be dead. He who had left her so full of life and strength three weeks ago. He could not be dead without her knowing it, or if—for the terrible thought knocked loud at the door of conviction, and tried hard to force itself into her mind—if he were dead—what was there left for her to do, but to go and die with him? She was wasting her time there. Katherine would come back and stop her. Christabel felt as if her only chance of escape from madness lay in instant action, in giving herself a loophole for hope, by saying that there was something to be ascertained yet, that this ghastly explanation which had come, could not be the true one. She would fight against believing it, to the last.

She left the letters on the table and the lamp burning. Katherine might read and discover all now if she pleased, and she hurried out of the house, meeting no one on the stairs but Sidney, who remembered afterwards that he had been startled by her white face and the gesture with which she had put him away, when he tried to speak to her. The wind blowing in her face, for it

was a fresh night, brought for the moment a wonderful sense of relief and returning vigour. She felt as if, in escaping from the house, she was leaving the misery of the last three weeks, with this crowning agony, behind her. She was going to find out the truth for herself; and there must be some alleviation in it for her, something more of him, than that blank horror which had been thrust into her face so suddenly to-night. She should see the people who knew all about him face to face, and make them tell her something else. The way she took on her walk to the railway-station was so full of recollections of him, brought back so many pictures of him strong and young and full of childlike gaiety, that every step furnished her with fresh arguments against believing him dead.

He the Lord Anstice who lay buried already in some distant mausoleum! She could almost have laughed aloud at the thought, while she walked past the lamp-post where they had talked of their first meeting, and exchanged their first look of love, she and her young artist lover. She hurried on through the dark railway-arch,—so full of recollections of him—but she was obliged to pause for breath at the foot of the steps that led to the railway-station above; and, as she stood still for a minute looking down the vista of the long street where they had walked together on Christmas-eve, the tinkling of a tambourine and the sound of a voice singing in the square below, reached her. Yes, there was a child dancing and singing under the trees of the square-garden, just as on that evening; only now it was a little Italian boy with active bare feet and elf-locks, who sent the foreign words of a gay little song through the summer English air, giving an aspect of remoteness, so it seemed to Christabel's highly-wrought mood, to the old familiar street. Would people dance and sing if he were dead? Christabel thought she would tell him all about this evening scene when they met; how she had stood forlornly wondering and comparing it with that other time, and how dreary and visionary it had seemed without him. Perhaps she would make a picture of it, as she had done of that other singing scene, while he stood by, looking over her shoulder.

She heard when she entered the station that the night mail to the north would start in a few minutes, and she had only just time to secure a ticket and hurry on to the platform, before the whistle sounded. The next minute she found herself shut into a first-class carriage, and luckily, as she thought at first, alone.

The rapid motion of the train bearing her onwards to the attainment of her object brought a sense of satisfaction at first. This sustained her for an hour or so, till London streets were left far behind, and they had emerged out of smoke, and noise, and squalid suburban buildings, among quiet green fields and hedgerows, and distant prospects of solitary homesteads where the summer twilight lay muffling all things in soft grey repose, a dewy dimness, that minute by minute, as the scenes flew rapidly past, deepened into the darkness of a moonless night. The thickening shadows fell with a terror and chill over Christabel's excitement, calming her down, but as if with a heavy oppressive hand laid upon her, to crush out life and hope. As the night and the solitude deepened, and the silence intensified round her, she felt as if successive veils of illusion were stripped from her mind, leaving her face to face with herself, as she had never stood before, in all her life.

The bright fancies that had been her companions from childhood, and which had seemed far more real than herself or any outward object, looked back at her for a moment with farewell yearning faces, letting her know that she was exiled from their world for ever. They had all merged themselves into a golden, glowing atmosphere surrounding one shape, and with the going down of that sun, they too would vanish for ever, leaving her alone, alone in the alien world of bitter hard fact; let down into bare existence, amid terrible crushing realities, to face herself there—a shrinking naked self, stricken helplessly through and through with cold and despair. Katherine's love alienated and turned into contempt by conduct she could no longer explain or defend; her husband dead without having acknowledged her; herself—her life given away and lost—for, bit by

bit, the various events and circumstances that she had seen hitherto under false halos of feeling or fancy, arranged themselves with pitiless significance, and she understood clearly what she had done, and what had happened to her. The letter, which she had read twice, came back with no cloud over its meaning now, no possibility of escaping the terrible certainty it brought.

She found it as impossible now to doubt that her husband was dead, as it had been impossible to believe it an hour before. She began even to think that she had known it all along, and that the utter silence and blankness that had surrounded her, during the last three weeks, could not have been felt by her if he had been in the world anywhere, even keeping silence towards her. His heart would have responded to her heart; there would have been a vibration of the chords if he had been anywhere within mortal reach; nothing but his death could have made her so utterly lone and cold. And he had gone, too, without leaving a word for her. "Miss Moore," the name in the clear handwriting came before her eyes again as if it had been written in fire. There had been no word about her then on his death-bed, nothing to break the dead blank, the silence which had become already intolerable. She should never know if she had offended him by any word in her letters, never know if by chance there had been a thought of love for her in his mind when he died; never, unless she could follow into the blank silence where he was gone, and perhaps find him there, and ask him, standing face to face with him once more.

Christabel feebly wrenched herself away from the growing, dangerous fascination of that thought, and tried to turn her mind to something else. What had she done in coming here? Where would she find herself, when the train stopped in the early morning? What was she travelling towards? A grave, a closed grave, a mausoleum guarded in some stately park where she should be denied a right to enter. That was all there was left to her—a grave she could not establish her right to weep over, no, not with Katherine. She might tell her long story, but who would believe it now, perhaps not even Katherine? Had she not lost herself, and in reaching

out towards a new happiness, fallen through into nothingness, nameless, and fameless, cut off from all that held her to life? The dark hours of the night passed while thoughts of this nature surged through Christabel's brain, billows and great waves of trouble going over her head, and she raised no cry for help to any Power above. She let herself drift before the dark bitter waters, knowing that they were bearing her on to a purpose, to a dark descent that lay near, and which the longer she allowed herself to contemplate its proximity, grew more fascinating, as promising, at least an end, a solution of all difficulties.

The first faint streak of dawn that crept chill and pale into a rainy sky, pierced her with a fresh dart of pain, stinging her into quicker thought and urgency of resolution. It must be done in the dark, if it was done at all. A step out into the dark would be so much easier, and then there would be an hour or two for the crushed body to lie still, wherever it might fall, and grow stiff and cold before stranger eyes came to look at it, or stranger hands to touch it. Christabel had never feared pain or discomfort in her life, and that part did not trouble her. She had been used to live half out of her body in a world of dreams, unconscious of many things that would have been painful to others; and bodily suffering, the momentary bodily suffering of such a swift death, had no terror for her just then. Katherine would be sorry, but she would go back to Zürich unfettered, to the friend who valued her and sympathised with her aims; and in successful work and gratified ambition forget this summer's sorrow sooner, perhaps, than if *she* lived on a dead weight and perpetual reminder of failure. For herself—in another moment she should know where *he* was, and what he felt about her now. It was the only swift way of getting at a knowledge which seemed to Christabel to sum up all desire—whether he loved her yet, and how it was that he had kept silence to her at the last, and not called her, as surely he might have done, to come after him.

She moved close to the window and let down the glass. There was just light enough now to see that the train was passing between high grassy embankments,

from the top of which came a faint scent of new-mown hay and dying flowers. A quiet enough resting-place where she might lie perhaps unseen and untouched for hours. She turned the door-handle and found it yield to her touch, and then, just as she was about to take a step forward—for she intended no haste, only to walk out into the faint morning—she heard or thought she heard a voice calling her—Christabel! Christabel! It was so loud and clear, that she turned round and seeing no one, only the empty carriage, showing its emptiness clearly in the growing light, she sank back into the seat she had left, trembling from head to foot, and startled out of her dreadful purpose into another state of consciousness. Christabel! The sound came to her again, but now it was a soft whisper as of some one speaking in her ear, tenderly and imploringly. The tones carried her back years and years, till she felt as if she had got quite away from the lonely self that had so frightened her, and was a little child again called to stand by her mother's side. She felt as if she were leaning against her mother's knee, and listening to some words she had not thought about for long years, but which came back to her now, as an oft-repeated saying of her mother's to her: "Christabel, beautiful for Christ." She could not remember whether her mother had thought her name meant this; or whether she had been in the habit of telling her it was this she meant her to be, when she gave her the name Christabel,— "beautiful for Christ." And she had not thought of it in all these years. Was it true? Was there Some One—above and beneath all—who cared for her, and was so with her every moment, underlying all her life, that the utter loneliness, the bare selfhood which had terrified her a little while ago, was only another of her illusions, an unreality which was now being stripped off, to show her at last the true secret of life, which she had missed in all her dreams? The dawn kept creeping on, making visible swiftly-changing pictures of rain-gemmed grass blades, and dripping trees, and cattle in distant meadows standing up to greet the daylight, and birds stirring and piping to each other in the wet hedgerows. The morning had come, weeping and sad, but full of life, and

patient, still sweetness. The night was passed and with it the dark temptation to which Christabel had so nearly yielded. She had no vivid sense of escape, and as yet no conscious remorse; she lay back in the seat not caring even to shut the door, though the rain came in and drenched her dress. The power of thinking and feeling vividly seemed to have gone from her, and for a time she felt nothing but the sense of a loving presence all around her, and a glad conviction that the isolation which had almost driven her mad was all a mistake; a greater unreality than any of her former fancies. They indeed were shadows; but there was something, Some One beyond the seen, where she, even she, a vain dreamer who had missed her way, could be at home. She need not get out of the body to seek it, for it was here. •

Gradually the light as it grew stronger seemed to gather itself into a form, a face that bent over her—her mother's face—Katherine's—*his*—for a little while the likeness changed from one to another, looking at her always with eyes of love; but at last it resolved itself into a grander image, whose face, while it had a likeness to all that she had ever loved or dreamed of as beautiful or desirable, far transcended all her thoughts. All perception of outward things faded, as her inward eyes were intent on this vision, and as she went on looking, a sense of familiarity, of old and new acquaintance, blended in it and grew upon her. Not her mother, not Katherine, not *him*, not anyone of the dream creations she had imaginatively loved for their beauty and nobleness, but a familiar Friend nevertheless, closer than any of them, who had been with her, unheeded all the time, supplying the root of her life.

“Did you not know me, my child?” the lips and eyes that were all love seemed to say to her. “You have thought the thoughts that I inspired. You have spoken My words; you set forth to fight on My side in the battle against evil, and yet you forgot Me, and have often gone near to deny Me, while I was standing by your side and giving you the strength to speak and think; a love which you took to be your own. Look at Me now, and see if I am not better than the images that have hid Me from you so far.”

And then Christabel, yielding to a guiding impulse, followed herself in vision backwards through the years of her life, and behind all its true struggles, prompting all its higher yearnings, she saw this love on which she had turned her back, but which had been drawing her all the time. And, as she looked, the loving voice said to her softly from time to time :

"Ah, if you had only known, if you had looked at Me, how I could have helped you ; how strong, how wise you might have been. You could have afforded to wait patiently for the human love, if you had known what arms were around you, and that it was on everlasting love that your life was built up."

The daylight grew stronger and stronger, and the roadside stations began to show signs of activity. Faces appeared at the carriage-windows when the train stopped, and voices of this world, speaking on common topics, pierced through Christabel's vision, and brought her back to a recollection of where she was, and to the necessity of rousing herself to meet the urgent calls of the day ;—the new day that had begun for her, as well as for the rest of the world.

A guard came to shut the carriage-door on the first stoppage after daybreak, and cast an inquiring look on Christabel's white face and rain-drenched garments. And when the train waited for an hour soon afterwards, he appeared again, benevolently bringing her a cup of coffee, and asked to see her ticket.

Thus put upon the defensive, Christabel made a great effort to collect her thoughts ; her eye fell on the name of the station at which they were waiting, and it appealed to her memory, and helped to steady her mind and bring her to decide on a plan of action. She recollected that she had stopped at this town on her former journey, and that it was only a few stations from the village to which she had taken her ticket ; and when the guard returned for the coffee-cup at the end of an hour, she was able to question him. She ascertained that the early train stopped at the junction three miles from Thorpe Leigh, and that there was usually an omnibus to meet it.

The man seemed relieved to find her willing to talk, and at the name "Thorpe Leigh" grew communicative.

"Was the lady going to the Great House?" he asked, with a glance at Christabel's dress, that chanced to be a black one.

No doubt she knew all that had happened there lately. It was just a fortnight since there had been a grand funeral train at the junction she was going to get out at, sent to meet the body of the poor young lord, drowned in Scotland, that had travelled by the up night mail from the north, to be buried in the mausoleum at Leigh. A great show it was, and plenty of mourning-coaches to follow the hearse, but most of them were empty. There was no one left in the place—no relation, that was to say, to follow the corpse to the grave. It had been a great deal talked of in those parts.

Did he know the place? Christabel asked, encouraged by the interest in his face. Had he ever seen the—the gentleman whose dead body had been brought to the junction?

Well, not often; he did not know him to speak to, the man told her, but he was a native of these parts, and a cousin of his had lived in the Great House in the old lord's time, and kept the village inn at Thorpe Leigh now, a pleasant quiet little place, where folks went sometimes for their health in summer. The young lord himself was fond of stopping there, and used to tell his cousin that he felt it more home-like than the big house. Oh yes, he was well liked by those who knew him, and there were plenty of the poorer sort who were very sorry to hear of his death; but there was not anyone to be called a mourner at the funeral, not anyone belonging to him. It was the agent and the lawyers that had managed it all.

Luckily the guard's spare time came to an end here, before Christabel's self-control completely failed her; but when she was alone again, the picture of the stately lonely funeral did for her what her own personal sorrow had failed to do; it touched the pathetic side of her thoughts, and unsealed the fountain of tears, and she was able, for the first time since her trouble began, to weep freely. She felt weak as a child when the passion of tears had exhausted itself, but the excitement of brain was relieved, and she could think calmly.

The one place that had any attraction for her now was this little inn at Thorpe Leigh, that he had called home-like, in whose neighbourhood they had spent a long summer's day together, and where he had nearly disclosed his secret to her. There she might hear news of him ; if not of his last days, at least anecdotes of the times when he had not been all hers, which would give her a possession in them that she had often longed for. From thence she could at all events remedy the omission that had struck her just now as so pathetic ; she could stand, a real mourner, and weep at his grave. In taking her ticket from her purse, where she had placed it the evening before, she discovered a store of bank-notes, that must have been folded away by her husband in an inside pocket on the day of their parting, and which she now perceived, with some grieved surprise, had been designed to last her through a much longer separation than she had anticipated at the time. This discovery at all events made the gratification of her present wish easy, and determined her to write and beg Katherine to join her at Thorpe Leigh for a few weeks.

Further than that, Christabel did not feel at all disposed to look just then. Indeed, when she left the train at the junction, and got into the omnibus that was to take her to the village, nothing but the interest of recognising the scene of her last walk with her husband could have kept her up, under the suffering that increased upon her as the hours passed. When she arrived at her destination, she was glad to use the plea of health-seeking, which the guard had suggested, to account for her visit to the place ; for she felt so ill that her one object was to escape to her room unquestioned, and reserve the little strength that remained, to write a letter to summon Katherine to come to her.

CHAPTER XXXI.

UP THE MOUNTAIN.

Though winter be over in March by rights,
*Tis May perhaps ere the snow shall have withered well off the heights :
You've the brown ploughed land before, where the oxen steam and
wheeze,
And the hills over-smoked behind by the faint grey olive trees.

MADAME DE FLORIMEL was not a person who could take her pleasure silently, even when it was the enjoyment of such scenery as two or three hours' steady ascent from La Roquette, brought her into. She had made the journey every summer, since her husband's death left her free to indulge herself in the English luxury of spending a few weeks of each year from home ; but none the less was she full of astonishment and exclamation, and eager for sympathy when a turn in the road brought a yet higher snow-capped peak in sight, or disclosed another aspect of the diminishing valleys and plains they were leaving behind them. The two preoccupied irresponsible faces on the opposite side of the carriage began, before very long, to act as a great hindrance to her satisfaction, and when the last glimpse of La Roquette, lying like a sparkling emerald gem amid its dwarfed grey olive-clad hills (which Madame de Florimel never failed to greet with a shout of welcome), called out no more than a languid remark from Lady Rivers and Alma, she could bear the situation no longer. Her respect for Wynyard's supposed disappointment yielded to her own urgent need of companionship, and after their stoppage for the mid-day meal and rest, she contrived, through one pretext or another, to keep him and his horse constantly close to the carriage for the rest of the day. She was continually discovering some want or inventing some fear that he only was capable of dealing with. Wynyard was in a mood to welcome this early opportunity of testing his power of being thoroughly at ease and unconcerned in Alma's company. He had been a good deal disgusted with himself for feeling so much emotion as her sudden appearance at La Roquette—two afternoons ago—had called out. It vexed him to have to remember that

the mere vision of her face had been enough, for a few hours at least, to overthrow the train of thought and feeling he had been so carefully building up during the last three months. Now that a day's and night's sober reflection had restored his equilibrium, he had a proud sense of self-conquest in being able to chat quite easily with Madame de Florimel about La Roquette affairs, while Alma was listening, undisturbed, except by an occasional wonder as to what *she* thought of his coolness—or by a passing consciousness that the face opposite Madame de Florimel wore the softened dejected expression which, of all its other beautiful looks, had been the dearest to him in the old days. If Horace Kirkman's promised bride was in a sentimental mood, thinking perhaps of her delightful bridegroom, was there any need for him to concern himself about it; unless it were to be thankful for the complete restoration to sanity that made it a matter of so much indifference to him, that he did not glance at the bowed head and drooping lips a second time. To prevent the temptation to look again, from mere curiosity to ascertain if his first impression was correct, Wynyard spurred his horse up a steep cut of mountain path, that zigzagged above the carriage road, gathered a spray of wild quince-blossom and put it in his coat. When Madame de Florimel called him to her side, by-and-by, he made her admire its waxy pink-and-white blooms, and its fresh wild beauty. A flag of the spring he called it, strong, and fair, and choice—a spring face without a shade of guile in it—they were following the spring up the mountains, he said, and might for once in their lives, have a portion of the season's lights, and scents, and sounds twice over, each day the facsimile of another day they had already enjoyed down below.

When they had arrived at their night quarters, a modest wayside village inn, Wynyard deserted the evening meal for a walk among the hills, which he prolonged till the last flush of the sunset had faded on the snow-peaks; and though he came back with his arms full of mountain plants for Madame de Florimel to botanise, he did not linger more than a minute or two in the tiny parlour where Alma was seated before a tinkling.

piano, singing old-fashioned English songs as Madame de Florimel called for them. He went off to smoke a pipe and talk politics with some peasants and poor travellers who had congregated round a woodfire, and were eating garlicky-soup, and drinking wine in the kitchen beyond. He grew really interested in their talk, and cross-questioned them eagerly, trying hard to make out something of a picture from their solitary lives in the mountains, and so get a coherent notion of their ways of thinking. Yet all the time, between the questions and answers, high notes of Alma's voice reached him across the dividing space bringing well-remembered tones and words to his ear. "Douglas, Douglas!"—Was it a new tone of pleading, a new tenderness in the voice, or only the old powerful charm, a little more thrilling now, because unheard so long?

When his companions deserted him at last, and he had to take his candle and retire to a wide, draughty bedroom at the top of the house, he made up his mind that the peasant's talk had roused him a good deal more than might have been expected. He was so far from any inclination towards sleep, that he unpacked his writing-case and determined to utilise this unexpected activity of brain, by working up his evening's experiences into an article for the journal he was accustomed to write for. He fancied himself just now in the right frame of mind for the production of one of the semi-philosophical, semi-descriptive essays, that had made his name, as a writer, already fairly well known; but when he had taken his pen, and the surging thoughts began to arrange themselves a little, the words that rose first did not take the course he had intended. He wrote on and on, correcting, changing, pacing up and down in the excitement of composition, till the first streak of rose-light dawned on the mountain-peak opposite his window, and it was clearly no use to go to bed at all. But his night's work, when completed at last, was not by any means what he had intended it to be when he sat down—a dissertation on French peasant-life in the Basses Alpes, and French peasant politics. It was a poem that had grown up under his pen, as little as possible related to anything that had happened, or that he had been thinking about

during the day ; except perhaps that its music had, to his ear as he read it over for the last time, a ring, here and there, of the sweet rising and falling notes he had caught through the discord of the kitchen noises. It was a sea-poem, and represented the conflict in the mind of a young sailor to whom the sirens are singing while his boat is nearing the sunny, white-sanded bay where his home lies, and his love is awaiting him. On one side of the boat stretches the many-coloured changeful sea, whose mystery entices and fascinates the sailor's eyes to look backwards, earnestly as he strives to fix them on the steady, reposeful prospect in front. Moment by moment the boat nears the shore with every stroke of his oar upon the water, while the voices behind him, singing in chorus, wax sadder and sweeter in their appealing cry. Will he plunge in, and resolve for ever the enigma that has tempted and haunted him from the first hour when he put to sea ; or will he, with a last vigorous stroke, climb the one wave that holds him back from the cheerful daylight and the restful green land ? The poem would not end with anything but the question ; and, after a trial or two, Wynyard was content to leave it there. It was the best thing, the nearest approach to what he could allow himself to call poetry, that he had ever written, he thought ; and yet, when, just as he had critically come to this conclusion, a sunbeam darted through his uncurtained window, and lit up the disorder of the table at which he had been writing, a sudden disgust seized him, and he was glad to huddle all the papers out of sight into his writing-case, and turn to the prospect of emerging white mountain-tops, and rolling mist-wreaths that his casement disclosed. His night's work seemed feverish and unreal as he gazed on, and as the solemn, steadfast mountain shapes, one behind another, dawned on his sight in the advancing daylight. The inhabitants of the little farm-inn were astir as soon as the sun was fully risen, and from his post of observation, Wynyard recognised one after another of his last night's acquaintance setting forth to the work of the day ; sensible people, who had slept well, and who were coming out now, with free healthy minds and bodies and single hearts, to earn another untroubled night's repose

in the strong, cool, mountain air. He would have done better, he thought, to write prose about them, than verse about sirens, or perhaps it would have been better still not to have written at all; for who was he to set forth his hasty notions about these simple, inarticulate lives, that were lived in the presence of such a nature as this, and whose patient round of toil and endurance possibly soared very far beyond his conception? It would be best, since the sensible night's rest was no longer attainable, to make as much of the sunrise for once as they did every day, and try if the keen morning breezes on those upland pastures would not help him to sensible, straightforward views of his own life. There it was, remote enough from sirens, if one could see it so very straitly mapped out by circumstances and character, his work, and the aims he had long ago set before himself—not unworthy ones, surely,—and, for nearer interests the Saville Street household; gentle little true-hearted Emmie West, whom he quite hated himself for not thinking about with more tenderness in her sorrow just now. He made a hasty morning toilette while he was battling with thoughts like these, and then left the house, following in the wake of the last set of workers he had watched from his window—a party of children leading a flock of goats by a steep rocky path to an upland pasture, in the hollow of the hill.

Some three hours later, Alma, from her window, which commanded the same prospect as his, saw him returning to the house, followed by two or three of the farmhouse children, and carrying their basket of mushrooms for them down the hill, and she augured badly for herself from the expression of his face. She had been used to read it like an open book, and she felt sure that he had been making some resolutions adverse to her aims, on that mountain walk from which he was returning so gaily. A moment's discouragement bowed her head, and then she raised it again, proud and joyful. Of course—of course—how could she even for a moment have so misread the signs? What need would there be to make resolutions, and why should he avoid her, if he did not care for her still? It would have been unlike him to show mere dislike or anger in that way. She

could imagine the sort of contemptuous kindness he would have shown her, if he had arrived at despising her only, and anything short of such contempt, she told herself, she could and would bear and conquer. Once convinced, as she believed she now might be, that he loved her still, she would not be daunted by avoidance—she would have courage to read the signs rightly, and trust that occasion would favour her with some golden opportunity for explanation, which she promised herself not to lose.

How natural it seemed, to be watching him, and feeling him her own! How familiar all the characteristic gestures were, and how dear! How could she ever have dreamed that anyone would rejoice in them but herself! It was not mere physical gifts, such as anyone might have, she was admiring, as she watched his quick, firm step on the mountain path. Horace Kirkman would have returned from a mountain climb as fresh and vigorous, but the peasant children would not have been clustering round him; he would not have stooped down just where the flinty watercourse intersected the path to hoist that little barefooted three-years-old urchin on his shoulder. It would not have been Horace Kirkman's instinct to turn back and hold the gate of the farm-yard open, for the white-capped old woman, bending under her load of firewood. Neither would he have found anything to say to the three Savoyards, grandfather, father, and son, who were lingering about the inn-door, for the chance of exchanging a morning greeting with the stranger who had talked with them so pleasantly last night. Alma half smiled to herself as she pictured the dumb, sulky dignity of demeanour that would have hedged in her late admirer from such advances, to say nothing of the sense of injury he would have felt, if anyone had supposed him capable of carrying on a conversation in two or three different *patois*. Yes, indeed, it required more than a surface polish, more than one or two generations of good manners, to acquire the simple, gracious frankness that won its way with every grade and age alike, and opened all minds as with a golden key. A royal nature, formed to shine in high places and govern men, Alma

called it now; not discerning, subtle-minded as she was in probing other people's doubtings, how much her point of view had changed with her secret knowledge; nor choosing to remember how jealous she had been of this very same facility when it had been Wynyard Anstice, the briefless barrister who outraged conventionalities royally, and chose his intimates irrespective of their value in society.

The start was later than Madame de Florimel would have liked if she had been alone, but Alma had won her heart last night by her singing, and she was disposed to be gracious towards her fellow-travellers. It was a morning of steady climbing, following the curves of the magnificent road that winds up the first range of the Maritime Alps, with rocky white cliffs, rent and torn into innumerable clefts, towering above, and sheer depths of precipice yawning beneath. There was little opportunity for the party to separate, and some real excuse for Madame de Florimel's nervousness, as the leading horse in their team was ill-broken. An hour or two after the start, this horse took fright at the sudden appearance, round a sharp curve in the road, of a baggage-waggon, with an escort of blue-coated soldiers, and it could not be quieted or persuaded to pass the object of its terror, till Wynyard, who had got off his own horse, led it forward, coaxing it with hand and voice into good behaviour. There was a moment of very real danger when the terrified animals plunged and threw their freight almost over the edge of the precipice, so that the far depths below, where a river gleamed and tinkled, became visible to the occupants of the carriage in a flash of distinctness that was very trying to their nerves. Alma was the only one of the ladies who showed decent presence of mind on the occasion. As soon as she saw Wynyard preparing to dismount, she called to him to throw the reins to her, and, by-and-by, taking advantage of a minute's quiet, she sprang from the carriage and took charge of the saddle-horse, leading it under the cliff out of the way of the turmoil while the difficult passage with the refractory team was accomplished. This was an affair of some moments. The baggage-waggon jangled far down the road, was lost behind

one curve, and emerged on another, and Alma had the scene to herself for long enough to be awed by the lonely grandeur of the heights above and depths below, before Wynyard returned to relieve her of the charge of his horse, and thank her for her service, and praise her courage.

His first words, after such an escape and in such a scene, were naturally more friendly than any that had passed between them hitherto, but when they had turned to walk towards the carriage an embarrassed silence fell. It however rather gratified than disconcerted Alma to perceive that her moody companion studiously avoided looking at her, turning his head to stare at the black spot far down the white road, which was all that was now visible of the waggon, or following the flight of a bird along the side of the cliff with his eyes, rather than let them meet hers. He must no doubt be thinking, as she was, of former occasions when they had been alone on a hill-side together, in those happy Isle-of-Wight days, when Constance and young Lawrence were so apt to stroll out of sight, and a tendency to dissolve into pairs had marked all their walking parties. If she did speak, she felt it must be about an earlier, less self-conscious stage of their intimacy, and at last, just as they came in sight of the waiting carriage, she found her voice.

"It was well," she said, as lightly and confidently as she could, "that you taught me how to speak to a horse long ago. Don't you remember that I took my first riding lessons from you and Frank, the second Christmas holidays you spent at South Lodge with us, when you and I broke quite out of bounds one day, and followed the hounds through a whole delightful morning, without anyone ever being the wiser?"

He did not look at her till she had finished speaking, but when their eyes met at last, she was startled by the anger in his. "How dare you put me in mind of those times, being what you are?" they seemed to ask. "How can you have the effrontery to court such recollections now?" She felt herself growing paler under the pain the steady look gave her, and then blushing violently, lest words she could never forget should actually be spoken. It was a relief to her when he

turned away without speaking, and prepared to mount his horse.

"You had better hasten on to the carriage," he said coldly, when his foot was in the stirrup. "I must mount here. They are waiting for you, and we have lost a great deal of time already."

When they were again *en route*, and Madame de Florimel had leisure to notice how pale Alma was, and how her knees trembled long after she was seated in the carriage, she was much impressed with admiration for the self-control she had previously put upon herself, and did not know how to praise or pity her enough. "It had, indeed, been a tremendous effort," she insisted, and Alma was a heroine who had shown the true English force of character in a moment of danger. "Where would you find a French girl who would have been worth anything when the management of a refractory horse was in question, or who would have volunteered to be left alone with a strange animal on a solitary road?" She had quite a fit of English enthusiasm on the subject of Alma's courage; and when Wynyard came alongside of the carriage, which was not for an hour or two, she could not refrain from magnifying it to him, by relating and dwelling upon the distressing after-effects which Alma's unheard-of exertions had brought upon her.

Wynyard, by that time, was equal to the task of expressing as much polite sympathy and anxiety for Miss Rivers's recovery as Madame de Florimel required of him; and Alma, through all the pain of hearing him speak of her and to her, as if she had been an ordinary travelling acquaintance about whom he was conventionally concerned, felt satisfied that a step in the direction of her own wishes had been taken, in what seemed at first sight so adverse to them. She need not fear another such rebuff; it was something that had to come, and was now over, a necessary step taken, preparing the way for the explanation that was to be given by-and-by. And now the security he would feel in having so plainly put a stop to conversation on old times, and prescribed a footing of acquaintanceship instead of their former intimacy, would make it easier to slide into ordinary talk on topics of the present. How much she could make of that, Alma knew,

even if she did not reckon, as she believed she might, knowing the pitiful heart she had to deal with, on a little compunction stealing in, now that he was made aware of the pain his anger had given her. Any way, she thought it was something got over, a step towards her end.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ON REVIENT TOUJOURS.

Ah! d'un ardeur sincère
 Le temps ne peut distraire,
 Et nos plus doux plaisirs
 Sont dans nos souvenirs.
 On pense, on pense encore
 À celle qu'on adore,
 Et l'on revient toujours
 À ses premiers amours.

THE succeeding days verified Alma's hope of greater freedom of intercourse being established between the different members of the travelling party who had set out in so much constraint, and with so many painful feelings to hold them apart. References to old times were rigidly avoided, and old intimacy tacitly ignored; but daily and hourly intercourse soothed down restraint and cured painful consciousness, until a quiet friendly footing prevailed among them all, which Alma was very careful not to overstep. It served her even better than she had expected. Wynyard no longer avoided speaking to her or looking at her; and as he was a person whose small coin in conversation soon came to an end, it was inevitable that in the course of hours spent in such solitudes as they were travelling through, topics should be touched upon, or allusions called forth which, in spite of the most carefully-preserved appearance of recent acquaintance, revealed sympathies in thought or recollection such as strangers could not possibly have had. Wynyard might keep studiously the slightest reference to former times out of his talk, but he could not hinder Alma from understanding a half-expressed thought of his, more quickly than any one who did not know his mind through and through, would have understood it; or

prevent her being able to supply a forgotten name in a Provençal legend which they had once read out of the same book. It was hardly surprising, as the days passed on, that the conversations, as they arose between those two, grew more and more engrossing, for they had the unusual charm of a mutually-felt, carefully-avoided memory,—a pearl of secret knowledge and intimate understanding gleaming up through the waters of ordinary talk, alluring the speakers moment by moment to dive down and bring it to the surface. No wonder that lines from Wynyard's siren song kept recurring to his mind, or that a vague discontent with himself mingled with a growing reluctance to anticipate the end of the journey. He would once or twice have broken away from the party if he could have done so without assigning any reason; but they had got into a district remote from railways, with few and recognised resting-places, and it was difficult to separate without an appearance of quarrel which he was anxious to avoid.

The middle of the fourth day's journey was to bring the party to St. Julien, the first place where they expected to find letters awaiting them, and their final stage before they reached Madame de Florimel's destination. This last was Château Arnaud, an old residence belonging to the De Florimel family, part of which had long since been degraded into a farmhouse and inn, while a few rooms were still preserved with the old furniture, in readiness for occasional visits from its owners. In Count de Florimel's lifetime such visits had been very rare, and seldom extended beyond a day or two. But madame had conceived a liking for the place, and was not without ambition of introducing into the management of the property, something of the English vigour that was bearing such good fruits at La Roquette. If only another Joseph Marie might be found to carry out her views at Château Arnaud with the same zeal and discretion that was shown at La Roquette, madame felt sure there would be everything to hope for the place. "And precisely the newly-married pair." Madame wondered she had not thought of this before—that she had ever dreamed of another lot for Madelon. How had it not occurred to her from the first! The marriage of

last week had evidently been made for no other purpose than to provide two managers precisely after her own mind, for her property at Château Arnaud—Antoine and Madelon! Here was the place made; and next year she might have English strawberries growing on the slopes above the château, and Alderney cows in the farmyard.

All through the morning hours of their last day's journey, Madame de Florimel kept Wynyard engaged in a brisk argument as to whether or not this brilliant idea should be carried out. Whether Antoine and Madelon should not be transported from their native place to reign as intendant and his wife over madame's property in the mountains. Wynyard really did not know why he objected, or why he should grow absolutely cross when madame put aside all the objections he raised against her scheme. It was nothing to him, and there was no excuse for his growing eloquent against the iniquity of anyone's being bribed to leave La Roquette who could live there in peace and tranquillity; he only understood that there was an actual pain in his mind which coloured his words, and gave them another meaning besides that which referred to Antoine and Madelon's affairs. Was it for himself that he was regretting the peaceful atmosphere of the place, and some pure influence he had felt there, which was slipping away?

It was the last morning, and Alma kept herself quite out of the conversation, sitting back, her eyes fixed on the receding snowy heights, and with an unwonted expression of uneasiness and dejection in her attitude and countenance. Her clasped hands lay uselessly in her lap; her eyes, though they turned always to the receding prospects, seemed to see nothing; her lips trembled every now and then as if she were struggling to keep back tears. Why should Wynyard's exaggerated praise of La Roquette vex her, or was it that at all, or something else, that troubled her and kept her silent? What did it matter to him? Wynyard asked himself. This was the last morning. That beloved, hated, bewitching, repelling face, with its haunting sadnesses and inscrutable lights and shadows, would never be so before him again, that he should be compelled to study it and wonder over its changes. It was the last of that sort of pain he

need ever have, for he was quite determined to stay only one night at Château Arnaud, where the Riverses were to remain a fortnight. He might reasonably plead long-neglected business as an excuse for hurrying away as soon as opportunity offered, and the next news that would reach him of Alma Rivers would be the announcement of her marriage in *The Times* newspaper some late summer morning towards the close of the season, when everybody was getting married. Kirkman—Rivers; the lines of small print seemed to float between him and her beautiful sorrowful face, and were reason enough for his thinking he ought not to look so much at it; though they afforded no apparent excuse for his throwing so much animosity into his arguments against Antoine's and Madelon's promotion. Alma heard the excited talk about a matter incomprehensible to her, and it helped to depress her; but it was not the cause of her sadness. It came to her muffled, through a crowd of anxious and regretful thoughts which made that last morning, to her also, full of bitterness. At Dimes they were to call at the post-office for letters. Madame de Florimel had ordered hers to be sent there from La Roquette, and Wynyard had mentioned incidentally last night that he had given that address to his London correspondent, and expected a budget of letters and papers.

The forenoon was stealing away, and they were going downhill rapidly. None of those excuses for getting out to walk or sketch that had occurred while they were ascending, could be found now; and no one this morning seemed to be paying any attention to the scenery, magnificent as it was. Lady Rivers on her side of the carriage, and Ward on the box were nodding comfortably through a great part of the morning, and Wynyard and Madame de Florimel were quarrelling. Alma, if she observed anything, saw only in the changing scene around, some other existence into which she longed to escape. The eagle that rose from crag to crag, and mounted in ever-ascending spirals into the wide blue—the rough-haired little shepherdess who paused half way up a green slope to look down into the carriage—yes, and even that bent figure of a poor Cagot-woman who, harnessed like a horse to

a rude covered cart, dragged her children and her belongings with horrible toil up the steep—awoke in her equally a vague longing to escape, to lose herself in any one of those lives, anywhere, so that she might avoid the defeat and shame she saw before her, the regrets whose bitterness she believed, in another hour or two, she should taste in full measure.

At the foot of the long descent the road wound through a ravine with a sheer cliff on one side, and on the other a river opaline with melting ice from the mountain-streams that fed it, and reflecting gems of colour from the flowery borders. Here there was hardly room for a horse to ride abreast with the carriage, and Madame de Florimel consented to a plan of Wynyard's that he should ride quickly forward to Dimes, which was a few miles out of the direct road to Château Arnaud, get any letters that might be awaiting them at the post-office, and meet them at a wayside resting-place where they could take their noon-day meal, and start for Château Arnaud with a shorter journey before them.

What a hurry he was in to get his letters Alma thought, as she watched him urge his horse to a gallop, as soon as he had gained a little distance from the carriage. He would have time enough to read them before she saw him again, and to open any newspapers that might be awaiting him, and take in all the immense change in his prospects that could not fail to be made known to him now, through one source or another. Crises of that kind act suddenly, and news of social elevation is apt to look familiar when it is an hour old. It would be Earl Anstice who met her, when next her eyes fell on that receding figure, and she should know in an instant that she had lost her aim, been defeated in the game for which she had played with a false die, the thought of which would shame her uselessly all the rest of her life.

Ah! fate had been hard upon her, very hard. She had only asked for one little half-hour alone with her lover, for he was her lover still, she was sure of that; only demanded one little rift to be made for her in the thin wall of ceremony that divided them, and she could have done all the rest herself. She could have said words that could now never be said, but which,

spoken half an hour ago, would have secured the happiness of two lives.

Oh the little more, and how much it is !
And the little less, and what worlds away !

Ah ! how bitter it was—how bitter it was to be baffled, for want of the opportunity to whisper one word !

Alma had time to indulge in these regrets without interruption when the party left the carriage ; for the farmhouse at which they baited the horses proved too uninviting to tempt the ladies to enter, and Madame de Florimel organised a little encampment in a meadow by the river. Alma withdrew herself a few paces from the others, on pretext of getting a better view of the head of the ravine for a sketch, and was virtually alone for an hour or so, when the meal was over. A person disciplined by much experience of sorrow would hardly have kept such bitter, self-regarding thoughts in the presence of the scene Alma was sketching. The grandeur and the calm would have rebuked the self-pity into peace. But Alma was not a disciplined character in any sense. She had never yet faced even as a possibility the thought of not getting what she really desired, in the end : she had hesitated between ambitions and likings, but she had never hitherto believed in disappointment as a possible condition for herself, and now that its shadow was falling on her, she rebelled fiercely against submission. There was no side of her mind that would admit the thought of denial. The lofty mountain peaks before her eyes, snow-capped, or bare and rugged, that meekly bore the brunt of the storms, and sent the fruitful rain down their barren sides, to enrich the valleys at their feet ; the river rippling past, from which the flowers and reeds on its banks were stealing their life every minute ; the glad mild air ; the wealth of rich colour, had no parable of self-renunciation to unfold to her, for she could not read their language. Their gladness and calm only struck her as a bitter contrast to the unrest and discontent of which her soul was full. Why should nature be glad and she sorrowful ? Why should the earth have its spring,

flowers bloom, and birds sing, if youthful hearts were to go unsatisfied, and the spring-time of a life be darkened with disappointment? As the outline of her drawing grew and she began to wash in the delicate first colour, Alma had by force of self-pity cleared herself of any sense of blame. She managed to forget her own half-heartedness in the first days of Wynyard's poverty, and even arrived at almost persuading herself that she had never seriously thought of becoming Horace Kirkman's wife. The tragedy of so true a love as hers being crossed, such a perfect happiness as she might have had being lost through a train of trivial mischances, was the only side of the question she would allow herself to look at. Wynyard's return took her by surprise at last. She had been listening for horse hoofs along the road, but he had alighted at a further gate of the farmyard, and hearing of their whereabouts came to the riverside on foot. He approached her first from behind, and held down a letter which she took without looking up. Yet something in his voice reassured her; there was no change in that, at all events.

"Your father's handwriting, I think," he said. "You will be glad of news."

Alma put the letter down on her knee, and went on with her drawing.

"Will you not open it?" he said after a while, still keeping his place behind her chair. "Are you not going to tell Madame de Florimel and me how Miss West bore her journey, and how she found her friends in Saville Street?"

"Not now," said Alma; "mamma is sleeping after her coffee, and I cannot rouse her to hear a letter read aloud. It will be all about poor Uncle West's funeral, and had better be kept till to-night, when the journey will be over, and she has a prospect of rest before her."

Alma fancied she heard an impatient sigh as Wynyard turned away from her to Madame de Florimel. Had he really expected her to give him news of Emmie West, she wondered, with the first pang of jealousy that had ever troubled her? Could he have heard that news and be thinking of Emmie West? In a few minutes she

raised her head from her drawing, and ventured on a scrutinising look at his face to see if she could detect traces of unusual emotion on it. He had thrown himself on the grass by Madame de Florimel's side, and was emptying his pockets of letters for her, and in another moment or two they were deep in La Roquette news; Wynyard evidently bent on making his peace with her, after his fit of contradiction by attention to the details she imparted. Everything that had happened in La Roquette from the moment of madame's departure to the hour in which Joseph Marie finished his despatch appeared to be retailed and commented upon. Alma convinced herself, as she listened, that Wynyard's interest in all this gossip was not altogether feigned, yet could he have endured the enumeration of the guests at somebody's wedding, and found an observation to make about everyone, if such news as Alma knew of, was really in his possession?

"Ah, here is a letter for you, Wynyard, from Paris, enclosed with mine. It must have arrived the very day after we started, and it seems to have something hard inside," and Madame de Florimel held a thin letter up to the light, showing a round dark circle through the paper, and looked at it rather inquisitively. Wynyard changed countenance as he stretched out his hand to take it.

"It will keep, like all the others," he said, thrusting it into the depths of his pocket with hardly a glance at the writing outside.

"Then you have had others."

"Oh yes," wearily. "A big budget sent on from my chambers, but it looks like business, and I have been such a sinner lately, and am in such deep disgrace with my chiefs, that I will not irritate it just now. Let us keep clear of proof and printer's ink, as long as we have those snow-peaks in sight at all events. When we arrive to-night in the region of prose, and prospective Alderney cows—'Butter and eggs and a pound of cheese,' it will be time enough to begin."

"But you have nothing else to do now," urged Madame de Florimel, who was bent on knowing what the hard circle she had felt within the Paris letter signified. "You will be tired of doing nothing for an hour, and

we shall have to wait quite as long as that still, for the *cocher* declares the horses are tired, and will not start before three o'clock. What will you do meanwhile?"

"I won't read my letters," said Wynyard laughing. "Give it up, dear madame, for I am not to be badgered into making any such sensible use of my time here. Come now, we have been quarrelling all the morning, think of something pleasanter to order me to do in nearly the last leisure hour we shall spend together, for how many years I wonder?"

"Make a sketch like Miss Rivers. I should be glad to have a drawing of yours to put between those two of your mother's that hang over my boudoir chimney-piece now,—you used to draw a little when you were last with me."

"A little, truly! For which performances I have just knowledge enough to blush now."

"But you ought to draw—being your mother's son."

"Ah, there has been a mistake about that, the talent I should by rights have inherited, has somehow passed on to my cousin Raphael, with the artistic name my mother chose for her godson instead of her son. We used to quarrel desperately about it when we were boys, for I had always been told I was to be the artist, and I could never bring myself to allow, even in the face of the clearest evidence, that he could do anything that I could not. I have had to cave in since, and confess that whereas I can only criticise, he might have been an artist if he had not been an earl."

"Ah, that is the pity! If you and he could but have changed places. He is terribly out of place where he is now, and as you say an artist lost."

"You might take a more cheerful and complimentary view of things, and look upon me as an able lawyer, or if that is too great a stretch of imagination for a hot noon-day, at least a penny-a-liner gainer, or you might congratulate me on being provided with an infallible test of friendship, by my reverse of fortune. Poor Ralph has been driven into solitude, from the dread that seized him as soon as he realised his consequence, of being absolutely hunted to death, and losing his senses among the fascinations offered for his choice. He will inevitably

end by marrying a kitchen-maid to secure himself from an angel, whereas I can pick my society with perfect safety, having the rough side always presented to me, and being allowed to see the most bewitching of mortals in their true colours. As Wyatt says in his Address to Fortune :

In hindering me, me didst thou further.

Poverty is an immense safeguard—and enlightener, I can assure you—an absolute Ithuriel's spear. By-the-way, I vote we all cap verses, and take for our subject the advantage of poverty as a test of worth—I will begin with Wyatt :

Though thou hast set me for a wonder,
And seekest by change to do me pain,
Men's minds yet may'st thou not so order ;
For honesty if it remain
Shall shine for all thy cloudy rain.

“There! I am sure, Miss Rivers will have no difficulty in capping me with something still more to the purpose.”

Alma kept her face bent over her drawing, not daring to seem to hear. Surely she did not deserve this. His heart must indeed be bitter against her, if he could thus speak on the last morning they were ever likely to spend together. If this was his way of looking at the past, she had rightly concluded that all hope of reconciliation would be over for ever when once he had heard the news that must already be in his possession, that he might now make his own at any moment.

The little less, and what worlds away.

Her drawing was all a pretence by this time, for she dared not lift up her eyes to the landscape for fear that the tears gathering in them should overflow, and she washed in colours at random while she debated with herself whether she had courage to brave out this last hour, or whether she should resign the faint possibility of a kinder word, and betake herself to her mother's side under a distant tree, where Lady Rivers was taking her noon-day sleep. There Wynyard would certainly not seek her, and when once her obnoxious presence was

removed, he would perhaps take out his letters—and then—her suspense would be over at all events.

“So you will neither of you cap my verse?” Wynyard said, still in the same tone. “That’s odd, I must say, when I have given you such a subject.”

“Miss Rivers is busy with her drawing, don’t you see?” said Madame de Florimel blandly; “and for me—you know my love for English poetry, I understood your Ithuriel’s spear, and think I could even repeat the passage. From Milton, is it not? But I have not the poets quite so readily as you have. It is not a fair challenge. You had better refresh my memory by reading something.”

How well Alma knew the worn copy of selections from Browning he drew from his pocket. It had stood on the schoolroom shelf for a year and a half, between one of his visits to South Lodge and another, and as he turned it over in his hands, the very rain-stains on the purple cover, and the worn edges, found voices to call to her, and put her in mind of words and thoughts, and looks of long ago, that made the contrast between then and now more bitter. How reluctantly he had taken the book back that morning when she had brought it downstairs, to give it to him, in a fit of girlish disgust at a complacent remark on their intimacy her mother had made in her hearing. And now—did he remember all that, or was it just a common book to him to be read indifferently with anybody? How much of it had Emmie West heard?—“Love’s so different with us men.” He dipped into the book here and there before making up his mind where to read, and Alma, knowing its pages almost by heart, could guess pretty accurately which were the poems he glanced at and rejected impatiently, “In a year,” “Two in the Campagna.” He was half-tempted to one of these she saw, and then he fluttered the leaf back almost to the beginning of the volume and began to read abruptly:

Just for a handful of silver he left us,
Just for a riband to stick in his coat—
Found the one gift of which fortune bereft us,
Lost all the others she lets us devote.

The scorn in his voice, while he was reading the first verse, and a yearning pathos that crept into the words of the second :

Blot out his name, then—record one lost soul more!
One more task declined, one more pathway untrod,
One more triumph for devils, and sorrow for angels,
One wrong more to man, one more insult to God!

were very audible to Alma, though blinding tears had come to her eyes and a rush of blood to her ears; and all the self-control of which she was capable only sufficed to keep her intensely still, with her face as well concealed as possible by her drawing-board, while the drops that would not be kept back any longer fell slowly and washed out her colours. She would not own herself convicted, by getting up till the reader's voice ceased, but then she would escape and at least secure herself from such torture as that again.

Life's night begins; let him never come back to us.
There would be no doubt, hesitation, and pain.

Would it never be over? How could a poem which treated of a wholly different matter say so much between them two? Had he intended it when he began to read? Had he divined her intention, and was he taking this way to warn her "not to come back to him?" The suspicion was so intolerable that Alma felt she could not endure the rest of her life under it, and from the very excess of pain, drew courage to fight against it.

The reader's voice ceased, having softened into a deeper pathos at the last line, and Alma did not move, not so much as to wipe the tears from her wet face. The sun would soon dry them, and when they were dried she thought she would speak. Some word to save her pride would surely come, before this last opportunity of justifying herself had slipped from her for ever. Madame de Florimel was the first of the three to break the silence. The passive character of listener to poetry she only partially understood, did not please her for long together, and as her companions were silent, she grew restless.

"The sun is growing hot here, and I thought I heard Lady Rivers stirring," she said. "I will go and see how she

feels disposed for an immediate start, and perhaps you will look up the driver, Wynyard, and try to persuade him to let us get away soon. I will send Ward meanwhile to help Miss Rivers to collect her drawing materials that there may be no delay when the horses are ready."

Alma relinquished all pretence at drawing when her companions' backs were turned, and covered her face from the hot sun, and the sight of her tear-stained paper, with both hands. She must compose herself in a few minutes, before she was called to take her place in the carriage, and sit opposite her mother and Madame de Florimel through the long afternoon. Perhaps Wynyard would come back to carry her sketching-board to the carriage. It would be only common courtesy, and let him be as angry as he might, he would never neglect that; if so, should she find the word she wanted? The sound of returning footsteps came much sooner than she expected, so long before she was ready to speak, that she kept her face hidden for quite a minute after she knew that Wynyard was standing in front of her, looking at her, and, for all she knew, at her tear-blistered drawing.

"Miss Rivers," a grave voice said, "Alma," and then she took down her hands and two pale agitated faces confronted each other. His was full of grave wonder, almost rebuke, and hers—she only guessed how piteous it was, by the compunction and pain that grew into the eyes that looked at her. "Madame de Florimel sent me to help you with your easel," Wynyard began after a minute's silence that seemed full of speech. "But there is no hurry, let us leave it for a moment and walk along by the river. The cooler air will do you good."

Alma obeyed, but she was weak with the pent-up emotion of so many hours, and as they walked slowly by the river-path, short quivering sobs kept rising, and prevented her answering when he tried to begin a commonplace conversation to set her at ease.

"I am afraid I have hurt you," he said at last, gently, "and I ought to beg your pardon; I came back for that."

"You meant it for me—oh Wynyard," she broke out. "You think I have done that, sold myself for a handful of silver!"

"I am sorry you so read the half-thought that was running in my mind. I ought not to have given you occasion. It was a shabby thing to do, to express, through another man's words, what I should not have dared to say to you in my own; I beg your pardon for it. Perhaps I hardly knew what I was doing; the words got into my head as I read, I think."

"But you think it?"

"I shall not think it after this; I shall go away a repentant man, ashamed of having judged you. I *had* no right to conclude that you did not love where you had chosen, and I beg Mr. Horace Kirkman's pardon as well as yours. He is a happier man than I took him for."

"Oh no, no."

"Well, I must always think him so, and, by-and-by, perhaps, I shall manage to do so without much grudging. —There!" holding out his hand—"let us shake hands over your engagement at last, and agree to-day that we will keep only the best recollections out of the past, and meet when we do meet, which won't be often, like old friends. I promise never to judge you again, or annoy you with my peevish mortification, at any rate."

She did not like the words, but she clasped the offered hand and held it, as a drowning man clasps a spar thrown to him amid the waves he is battling with.

"Wynyard, I must speak. I have tried to tell you before, and you would not let me; but this is perhaps the last time we shall ever talk freely together, and I cannot have you misunderstanding me all your life."

"Tell me anything you like."

"You misunderstood me just now. I do not love Horace Kirkman. I have never loved him; there is not a man in England that has less interest for me than he."

"And yet you are going to marry him."

"Oh, no, no. Wynyard, such a thing would never have been thought of by anyone, if you had not deserted me when I wanted you to go with me to Golden Mount last Christmas. The intimacy that has given rise to false hopes, and has lowered me in my own eyes, would never have been entered upon, if you had helped me."

"Alma!" going closer to her and taking her other hand. "But how can we so have misunderstood each other? Why did you not answer my letter?"

"I have not answered it yet. You told me to question my heart, and try myself; you said you would wait an indefinite time."

"Yes, indeed; waiting would have been nothing if you had only let me know it was waiting. And now, my darling, was it really so? Has your four months' hesitation brought you really to think you can take me and the life I offered you then? May I hope for an answer—the answer I hoped for—to-day—after all?"

"After all! Wynyard!" (reproachfully) "you must not say 'after all' so often. You must not reproach me ever, with those four months. I cannot bear it, for I have been loving you all the time."

They had turned a corner in the winding-path, and were now quite out of sight of the field, sheltered by overhanging wild briars and hazel boughs, and his answer was to draw her closer to him, and kiss the trembling lips that whispered the words.

"Alma, my darling, my long-sought love—my queen! Is it possible that you love me?" he repeated.

For a moment or two, they stood together in a bewildering rush of joy, with the glad sunshine round them, and the river rippling an accompaniment to whispered words of love, and only the solemn white mountain peaks for mute witnesses to their reunion. One moment of untroubled content. Alma counted that one moment, before the worm in her conscience began to make itself felt, and eat into the heart of her joy.

"And you remember my letter?" Wynyard said at last, putting her a little further away that he might get a good look into her face. "You know what you are doing, and what sort of an impracticable *tête montée* you will have to put up with, for a husband? You will not be regretting the Gog and Magog palace all the time, or the applause of the worthy Philistines who would have honoured you, for doing well to yourself? My comfort is that you have had four long months to consider of it. And at the end you really say, do you, my darling, that 'Love is enough?'"

"And you?" said Alma. "I have told you about myself—but you? What were you doing and feeling all those four months you talk so much about? Tell me."

"Trying with all my heart and strength to forget and despise you; how successfully we won't say."

The words were spoken with a smile, and he drew her close to him again, begging her pardon in half-a-dozen different forms of self-accusation for having dared to doubt her, promising to credit her with every sort of disinterestedness and nobleness for the future. But even with his arm round her, and his loving thanks and praises in her ears, Alma felt that the moment's perfect content was over for her. The momentary tone of contempt had recalled her to a consciousness of facts she had been trying to forget, and she felt how different this taking of him was from what he believed it to be. "Some day he will find it out, and then what will he think of you? All this praise and gratitude is not given to you, for he does not know you. It is not yours." So the irrepressible small voice began already to whisper, poisoning all the sweets of love.

Madame de Florimel's shrill voice calling for them, reached their ears before Alma had brought herself to look up and speak frankly again, and she hastily drew her hands away.

"Remember," she said, "not a word, not a look to startle my mother, or awaken Madame de Florimel's curiosity, till I give you leave. My mother must be prepared."

"Surely," Wynyard said, "after waiting four months in utter darkness I can bear a few hours' more silence, but don't let it go on. I know, dear, that there is a great deal for you to do and bear yet, that we are still very far from the goal; but let me have my fair share of any fighting there may yet be to win through, before we reach it. Don't put me aside again, and take all the brick-bats that may be flying about in the shape of remonstrances, on your own dear head. I think I should count for something in it, even with Lady Rivers, so don't let me be kept out of all knowledge of what is befalling you again."

"Only for to-night," said Alma hastily. "I must talk to mamma alone to-night. There is Madame de Florimel coming to look for us. Let us go to meet her."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FORTUNE'S WHEEL.

Similamente agli spendor mondani
 Ordinò general ministra, e duce
 Che permutasse a tempo li ben vani
 Di gente in gente, e d' uno in altro sangue
 Oltra la defension de' senni umani
 Per ch' una gente mipera, e l' altra langue
 Seguendo lo guidicio di costei
 Ched è occulto com' in erba l' angue.

MADAME was not very much disturbed by the long *tête-à-tête*, nor even scandalised by the signs of recent agitation on the two faces that confronted her when she turned the corner. It was all very English; she did not quite like Alma's independence of her mother, but she excused Wynyard. For a young Englishman, there was, perhaps, no great indiscretion in seeking a private interview with the cousin of his lady-love when he wanted to hear news of her. In England at the present time such confidences appeared to be admissible between young people, even of a certain rank, judging from the evidence of recent novels she had read. Madame, therefore, felt herself at liberty to mark her disapprobation no further than by a slight coldness in her manner of meeting the wanderers.

During the afternoon's drive, while Wynyard kept out of the way, she glided easily into talk with Alma about Château Arnaud affairs, and being used to one-sided conversation, she was scarcely at all disconcerted by the scanty, unmeaning responses she got to her remarks. One could not expect every English girl to be as intelligent about foreign farming matters, as that sensible, pretty little Emmie West had invariably shown herself.

Alma, on her side, found the effort of bringing out her "Yeses" and "Noes" in tolerably right order, a

sufficiently hard task, and yet she was not sorry to be obliged to make it. It had a steadying effect on the tumult of thoughts and feelings that were struggling for the upper hand in her soul. Wonder, joy, love, and threatening remorse and self-disgust. It helped her to keep herself afloat in an unreal dream of present circumstances; the only way in which she could look at them, and preserve her calmness. She determined to let herself imagine, just for that one afternoon, that things really were with her as Wynyard was believing them to be, as he rode on and on through the dreamy, sunny May afternoon. That it was just Wynyard Anstice she had accepted for her husband; that she was going to share a modest life with him, and that the letters he was carrying on to read leisurely at Château Arnaud, contained only ordinary news about his literary work, as he thought.

At sunset the travellers passed through a little town, built on the river whose borders they had skirted nearly all day, and as they entered the roughly-paved street, they met a procession of robed priests, singing hymns, and carrying wreaths of flowers to a chapel on the other side of the river, whose tinkling bell they heard summoning worshippers to some special service in honour of Mary's Month. The coachman drew up just before reaching the bridge, to avoid interfering with the *cortège*, and Wynyard rode to the side of the carriage and pointed out the chapel, half-hidden among plane trees, to which it was bound. While he spoke and looked at her, Alma realised her fancy for a moment or two as she wished. It was all so dreamlike. The chanting voices, and the faint scent of the flowers borne past them, the sweet, cool rush of water among the reeds at the bank's edge, and the long, level rays of golden light on the tree tops, and on the still spaces of the fields, and on the broad reaches of the hazy river. For a moment her thoughts met his without the dividing barrier of unshared knowledge, and she forgot everything but the love and trust in his eyes, and was able to think herself his, in the fashion he believed her to be, as she had been striving to do all the afternoon. Then the carriage began to move on again, and Wynyard, left behind, got off his

horse to pick up a flower that had fallen from one of the wreaths, intending to ride after the carriage and give it to Alma; but it was a May rose, and after one glance at it, he threw it back into the dust again, remounted, and rode on slowly: he had received his first pull down to earth from the height to which Alma's confession had lifted him a few hours before. It was nearly dark when they reached Château Arnaud, and Lady Rivers, worn out with the long day's travelling, retired to her room at once, and did not reappear at the late meal. The rest of the party reassembled in one of the damp-smelling upper rooms of the house, left untouched from year to year between the brief visits of their owners. Such signs of recent preparation as were visible, the wood fire blazing on the handsome, rusty, brass andirons, the nosegays in the great vases in the window recesses, the well-spread centre table, only seemed to bring out more prominently the stately unhomeliness of the place, and draw protests from the faded tapestry, and the old-world allegorical figures painted on the ceiling, against the impertinence of a modern generation in bringing its obtrusive interests and commonplace loves, to disturb the atmosphere left by long-dead actors of statelier times.

Alma kept out of the way till she was summoned to the table, and Wynyard, who was waiting at the door of the salon to take her in, was surprised at the shy gravity of her face, and her avoidance of his glance through all the first part of the meal. He thought she had been talking to her mother, and that the confidence had been ill received, and he longed for the moment when he might comfort her. Apropos of a love-story, provoked by one of the portraits on the walls, into which Madame de Florimel launched during supper, he threw in a remark or two, playful or serious as the case allowed, which Alma might apply to themselves, as well as to the old hero and heroine, if she pleased. But not even by that device could he win an upward look or a smile.

When supper was over they went into a balcony at the back of the house, to get a distant moonlight view of the mountain range they had that day descended, and when Madame de Florimel was leaning over the balustrade, wrestling with a refractory vine-branch that had

lost its hold on the woodwork, Wynyard found an opportunity for a whispered word.

"Yes," he said, "I see how it is. Your mother is unhappy, and you will not look at me. Never mind, dear. We will make her a great deal happier between us, by-and-by, than she could have been any other way. But I wish I could bear the present pain for you both. I wish just now, as I never thought to wish, that I still had that to offer you which would satisfy her ambition for you, and spare you the pain of disappointing her."

"Do you—do you, indeed?" Alma cried, startled out of her caution for a moment, and looking up at him with eager glad eyes. "Should you really be glad to know that we were not going to be poor?"

"I do not know that we shall be what I call poor," he answered, a little mortified at her eagerness. "Have a little faith in me, Alma, and persuade your mother to believe me worth something. It is not such a very hard lot I am asking you to share, dear, that you need look so fearful over it, and refuse me a smile on our betrothal night. I promise not to turn my back on any good fortune that comes, provided it is not through Mr. Kirkman's conjuring. Will that satisfy you?"

She would not see the hand stretched out to take hers, but slipped to Madame de Florimel's side, and busied herself with the vine-shoots till it was time to go in.

Bitter thoughts against herself swelled up in her heart. It was always the same, she told herself; unfit for either course—too half-hearted to carry out any line of action thoroughly, good or bad; a waif buffeted about by caprice and conscience, and getting the evil of both courses by half-doing. If she could have responded cordially, and assured him that she did not fear poverty with him, all might have been well, and the good news might even yet have come sweetly; but conscience had made a coward of her, and planted a thorn already in their intercourse. Would that little wrong-doing in the beginning always crop up in her thoughts like this, or would she have strength—the evil strength or the good strength, she did not know which—to crush down the remembrance effectually at last, and walk into the

perfect happiness that seemed so very close to her, and yet, in spite of what had been said to-day, not hers yet—not in her heart this moment?

Wynyard remained out in the balcony long after the ladies had left him. It had been an exciting day, a wonderful day, and it was not surprising that he could not all at once turn to his letters, especially as that thin letter with the Paris post-mark and the little hard circlet inside, was the one in all the budget that recurred to his thoughts first. The shrinking he felt to open it was a greater pain and remorse to him than it would have been to a man who had less high views of what the relationship between men and women should be, than he had long entertained. It was in vain that he told himself, he might well be thankful there was so little to look back upon with regret, on his betrothal night. He had once thought to give a thoroughly loyal heart, that had never swerved, to the woman who loved him, and to have the assurance within himself that no other woman's life had been troubled or made the worse by him. And now there was the recollection of the shy happiness in Emmie's eyes when they stood upon the hill together at La Roquette, and whatever there might be in that letter to stand between him and the thorough satisfaction in Alma's surrender he had once thought to have. He did not believe that there would be anything for Emmie but a moment's pain and surprise when she heard; and yet to have disturbed that trustful, childlike heart with a moment's pain, seemed a cursed thing to have done, and he would have given a great deal that it all had not happened. The more he tried to think only of Alma, and to recall her looks and her words, and dwell on the wonder of her surrender, the triumph of being loved by her after all—the more vividly did this little sting of regret trouble and pain him. It ought all to have been such perfect joy, and he was angry with himself for the want of loyalty that admitted a drawback in it. At last, when everything was still outside, and all the little lights had disappeared from the scattered houses on the hill-sides, he turned back into the room where the firelight had sunk down to glowing red embers, and a solitary candle was burning on the centre

table, and took out his letters. There was a large packet forwarded from his chambers in London, and Emmie's letter; this he opened first and read through, then slowly tore it into small pieces, throwing them one by one on the fire. Yes, it had been worse even than he had anticipated; the hopeless tone, decipherable enough through the simple words, the sad little postscript, and, worst of all, the tear-blister just at the corner of the paper where there was no writing, and which must have fallen as she folded it. He sat looking at the fire, seeing, not that, but the May rosebud on the dusty road from which he had ridden away, till he grew out of patience with himself, and turned sharply back to the lamplight and the budget of letters on the table, determined to give a new direction to his thoughts.

Several letters fell out when he opened the packet, and he took them up at random without looking at their dates. The first he read puzzled him a good deal. It was in an unknown hand, and referred to some communication sent on a previous day, an answer to which was anxiously expected. It ended with a postscript still more incomprehensible than the rest of the letter. "The body has not yet been found, but the coasts are being watched day and night, and two bodies of the shipwrecked crew came ashore this morning."

The next letter he tore open was from one of his literary colleagues, and was filled with congratulations on a sudden change of fortune. Throwing that aside, he came on a few lines from young Lawrence, written just before he started for Scotland, in which the whole story was plainly told: "Anstice is dead—drowned in Scotland—close to his place on the coast of Skye, where his mother was staying. She is in a dreadful state, and I am setting out to go to her to-day. You should come at once, for I shan't like to take more responsibility than I can help, and everything now devolves on you. You will have heard all particulars of the accident before my letter reaches you, for of course you were written to first. Getting no answer from you, Mrs. Anstice's companion sent to me, the only one of poor Ralph's friends at all come-at-able, or likely to have seen anything of him of late, and be able to comfort his

mother with news of him. Poor fellow! it is altogether a miserable business. It seems he had had a quarrel with his mother, and had been keeping out of everyone's way according to his wont. This is what I gather from his personal servant, just come to me from Leigh, who had heard nothing of his master for a month or more, before this terrible event. I don't congratulate you on the splendid fortune that must all come to you now. You will feel too much cut up about poor old Ralph to care to be congratulated yet; but, all the same, there can be no doubt about it—you're the right man in the right place at last, and have a fine career before you." There was a postscript to this letter too. "I just stepped in to No. 20, Belgrave Square, to tell Lady Forrest. She was immensely interested on your account, as no doubt other friends will be." Wynyard missed the postscript at first, and even when his eye fell upon it, on taking up the letter a second time, it did not make much impression, though long afterwards the words came back to his memory with a terrible light upon them.

Apart from the natural sorrow on hearing of the sudden death of a companion of early years, Wynyard was not the sort of man to feel any great elevation of spirits at the news of an unexpected acquisition of riches. He was too much in love with his own plans, too confident in his own powers of making a position for himself in the world without adventitious help, to escape a twinge of regret when the possibility of carrying them out and achieving his own aims, was thus snatched away. The new career offered him presented its weight of responsibilities first to his mind, and that with crushing effect. It was not until after hours of thought and efforts to calm himself that brighter views began to steal in, and whisperings of new hopes and ambitions to make themselves heard. Alma—he was tempted for a moment to regret that she too would be baffled of her design of giving up the world for love. He should never know now, how bravely she would have met difficulties, how nobly she would have encouraged him to wait patiently for well-earned success, if it had been slow in coming. He had had such dreams about

her once, but that was before his confidence in her had been shaken. No, in spite of to-day he could not go back to faith in that reading of her character. The best he could do was to rejoice heartily for her sake that she was spared a trial which might have been too great for her strength, and to resolve not to be over-critical as to the manner in which she should receive the news to-morrow morning. He would not measure the joy and triumph there would surely be on her face as if it afforded any test of the degree in which she valued his possessions above himself.

It was long after he had sought the quaint little bed, prepared for him in an alcove beyond the salon, before he could sleep; but, wearied out at last with the excitement of the day, he slept heavily and long, and the morning light was streaming full into the room when he opened his eyes. It showed him, between the curtains of the alcove, the salon-table still strewn with letters, and the tapestry chair where he had sat last night reading *that* news. He heard voices in the garden below, Alma and Madame de Florimel talking to each other; and all the events of yesterday came back instantaneously and clearly into his mind, one, as it were, balancing and steadying the other. He had awakened into a new existence, and the people around him had something of the aspect of strangers. Alma was his—yes—but he thought of her rather as the future Lady Anstice than as his old love, and he himself was hardly himself—something less, perhaps, than his former self, for the death of poor Ralph who had believed in him as no other, not even his wife, would ever believe in him again. Well, it was late, and there was a great deal to be done; he must start that morning for England, and he had better go down as quickly as possible into the garden where Madame de Florimel was pottering among her vegetables as if it were yesterday, and get over the task of telling his news.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MY LORD.

This is something like—there is some mettle in these London lords—these sparks know a woman's mind before she speaks it.

THE Château Arnaud garden had not kept even as much pretension to be called a garden as the pleasure-grounds around Madame de Florimel's house at La Roquette. There were a few traces of past grandeur, but utility had long since asserted its supremacy over ornament. Stately terraces and parterres had had their spaces invaded year after year by corn, and vines, and lucerne, till there was nothing to distinguish them from the adjoining field, but here and there a flight of broken, lichen-crusted marble steps, or an armless statue, or mutilated fountain basin, which some flowering gourd, or climbing bean-stalk, was making gay and useful at the same time.

Madame de Florimel, in her morning costume, was quite equal to the task of threading her way among the vine and vegetable patches, without any help of gravelled paths, and found amusement enough in prying into their promise of fruitfulness for the summer; but Alma soon grew weary of following and listening.

Long before Wynyard made his appearance outside, she had found out the only seat the place afforded. A mossy, carved, stone bench, under a Judas tree at the lowest point of the garden, where the inevitable château pond still existed, and nourished its army of green frogs. It may well have been some patched and powdered pre-revolution beauty, who last, before Alma, sat lazily on that bench in the working hours of a spring morning, waiting for a lazy lover to come to her, and who watched the glowing Judas blossoms overhead, and the green slopes stretching upwards towards a blue sky in front, with as little heed to their beauty as Alma had to give them to-day.

She could not understand Wynyard's long delay in coming out to tell her the news which he surely must have learned by this time. A thousand doubts and misgivings tortured her mind, and made that lovely

spring morning, the morning after her betrothal to the man she loved, a time of torment instead of joy. Is one never to be quite happy, she kept asking herself; is the prospect of success beyond all one's hopes, really worse to bear, because of the deadly anxiety it brings, than disappointment? She had been reading her father's letter aloud to her mother just before she left the house, and its tone of taking for granted that life was going on as usual with them, had worked her up into a state of unreasonable impatience and irritability. It was a long chatty letter, but there was, from first to last, no allusion in it to Lord Anstice's death, or to Wynyard's changed fortunes. Either her father had not yet heard Constance's news, or he did not believe it, or he passed it over as less likely to affect her and her mother than details about the poor circumstances in which the West children were left by their father's death. Then came the dreaded Kirkman name, and how hard Alma had found it to read aloud the sentence in which it occurred, without faltering or changing countenance!

"I found Horace Kirkman waiting at the house for me when I returned from Saville Street last night. He seemed anxious, and complained bitterly of not having heard anything from any of us for many days. Tell Alma, I think, considering all the circumstances, she ought to write to Mrs. Kirkman, if not to Horace. She must at all events *not* leave the young man on my hands. I have a great deal too much business upon me just now, public and private, to be complicated with a lover's grievances."

Clearly Alma would get no help from her father in extricating herself from her difficulties in that quarter, though, as she remembered with some bitterness, it was, more than anything else, a word from him that had led her to involve herself with the Kirkmans. If he had not given his support to that intimacy, how much fewer thorns would be in their paths now! And yet, again, was it possible that Constance's news might be a mistake after all? Had young Lawrence brought her a hasty report which had received contradiction before her father arrived in London? Were those letters now lying under the cut corks in Madame Mabile's commode merely

proofs of some magazine article, about whose mysterious miscarriage she might have to hear conjectures through years to come?

Alma's face and figure stiffened into an attitude of weary despondency, as this supposition confirmed itself in her mind by many circumstances of Wynyard's conduct last night and this morning. Her enthusiasm of yesterday, when she had longed to sacrifice everything for love, deserted her when the possibility of being called upon to do so, presented itself as close at hand. She could see nothing but irony in the fate which brought her to take the unprosperous lot at the moment when she had forfeited all claim to inward self-approval for the choice. She must in this case face the Kirkmans' displeasure, without any gilding of success to blind people's eyes in judging her, and bear her mother's disappointment, unsupported by a sound conscience, or by that free-hearted enjoyment of her lover's gratitude, which might have been hers if she had honestly deserved it. Outwardly and inwardly her prospects looked black every way. She had lost her self-respect and gained nothing.

During a pause in counting her artichokes, Madame de Florimel turned round to look at Alma's motionless figure on the garden-seat, and wondered at her apathy. She hardly looked handsome this morning, madame thought, when all animation was banished from her face, and with such an air of indifference, if not of gloom in her attitude. One could no longer feel surprised that she should have a younger sister married before herself, for the sight of one such fit of abstraction, would be enough to frighten away from any man the wish to make her his companion for life. With this conclusion, madame was going back to her artichokes when she saw Wynyard come out of the house, and look round the garden as if in search of someone. She beckoned him to come and join her, and when his eye persistently looked over her head towards the bench at the bottom of the garden, where Alma was seated, she left her spud sticking in the mould, and hastened up the hill to intercept him. Madame could not bear to lose her last chance of getting a sympathetic listener that morning.

Alma saw the meeting between the two, and interpreted all the little signs afforded by their looks and gestures, as they stood talking together, with anxious heart-throbs. Was it an ordinary conversation about the artichokes and the weather that kept them standing face to face so long on the slope of the hill, or was Wynyard telling his cousin *that* news?

They turned at last to come down the hill, talking as they came—and now madame's hand is on Wynyard's arm, and her face has a startled expression, while his is very grave. The nearer they approached the bench, the stronger grew Alma's hopes that no ordinary topic occupied them. Ah! they pause again close to the Judas tree to shake hands. Madame is looking up at Wynyard with a glance of proud satisfaction that makes Alma's face glow, and changes the fear she has been feeling into a new dread—a dread lest, when the supreme moment of hearing comes, as it must do immediately, she should show too little surprise at the long-expected news, or too much triumph. Scraps of conversation reach her ears when they move on again.

"Poor Mrs. Anstice!" madame is saying; "no, Wynyard, I don't forget her grief, though I acknowledge that my first thought was of you. I am myself a mother; I know what her desolation must be. Poor woman! I will not say a single word against your leaving me at once to go to her; and indeed there are other friends whom, at such a crisis in your life, you will be anxious to see at once. May I not say, another friend?"

But Wynyard's eye had caught Alma's by this time, and he did not wait to hear the end of madame's sentence. He hurried forward, his face glowing with sudden emotion, and, taking Alma's hands in both his, he raised her from the seat, so that they stood together before Madame de Florimel.

"I have another piece of news to tell you this morning," he began, "of even deeper importance to me than the last, of which Miss Rivers, as yet, knows nothing. You must congratulate me without any reservation this time. Yesterday Miss Rivers and I came to the happy ending of a long wooing, and it is two betrothed people you see before you this morning. You

will give us your blessing before any more is said, won't you?"

There was a moment's profound and embarrassing silence, during which an energetic green frog, croaking in blind forgetfulness of the daylight, and a cicala, half-way up the Judas tree, had the throbbing ears of two anxious auditors all to themselves. Then, madame, her keen grey eyes pitilessly fixed on Alma's face, said interrogatively:

"And Miss Rivers knows nothing as yet of what you told me, while we were walking down the garden?"

"Nothing whatever," said Wynyard. "I did not know it myself till after we parted last night. Pray don't let us frighten her by growing mysterious."

He felt Alma's hand tremble and twitch within his own, but he closed his fingers over it and held it firmly, avoiding another look into her face, lest he should increase her agitation, which he tried not to think more overwhelming than the occasion called for.

"Well, then, I will go back to my artichokes, and leave you to tell what will not frighten her, I am sure. It is not news of that sort which makes young ladies take fright at their betrothal."

"And you congratulate us," persisted Wynyard. "Come, madame, you are not going to turn crusty with me on the morning when I bring you such tidings as this? You will have to promise to visit us in England now, and look at the place where your primrose-roots were dug from. You must bring Joseph Marie to study English farming under my uncle's old tenants."

"I am too old for such a journey, and I would not expose either myself or Joseph Marie to ridicule," said madame, shortly. "As for congratulations—yes, Wynyard, I congratulate you, as heartily as I can congratulate your mother's son on an engagement. You must really forgive me if recollections of past times make my manner less cordial than I could wish it to be. In an hour or two, perhaps by the time Miss Rivers has recovered from the shock you are about to give her, my ideas will have arranged themselves, and I shall be equal to speaking as I ought. Meanwhile, I had better, ungracious as the suggestion may sound, see what can be done to

hasten your departure, since you are determined, you say, to start in an hour's time."

Madame turned away, and Wynyard led Alma back to the seat under the Judas tree, and placed himself by her side.

For another minute or two the duet between the green frog and the cicada was the only audible sound in the garden.

Wynyard, who had passed his arm round Alma's waist, felt that her heart was beating wildly under his hand, and her agitation affected him with the chill of reserve. He almost dreaded to end the suspense lest her fear should be succeeded by a burst of relief or joy that would jar upon his present mood.

"Why should she," he jealously asked himself, "care so agonisingly for anything beyond what was settled yesterday?"

"Well, dearest," he said at last, "I don't know what keeps us silent, for there is a great deal to be said, and only an hour to say it in. Why won't you look at me this morning? Are you angry with me for leaving you so long alone, or have you partly guessed what I have to tell you? I think madame's talk and manner must have suggested the news to your mind. Can you not guess what has happened?"

"No, no," Alma whispered breathlessly; "tell me. I cannot guess. I could not bear to guess."

"You are right," he said. "Yes, I should be sorry if you had thought of it. It is too sad and terrible a thing to come lightly into one's mind, and I am forgetting that a few hours have already made it familiar to me, so callous, so full of ourselves are we. I think you only saw my cousin, Ralph Anstice, two or three times; the last time was at Constance's wedding. You will be greatly shocked to hear that I have had news of his death. He died quite suddenly, a week ago, and but for our being out of the region of letters, I should have heard sooner. Poor fellow! I wish you had known him better, that you might help me to remember him as affectionately as his kindness for me deserves."

There was a long pause. Alma could not bring herself to utter an exclamation of surprise, or to ask a

question about the manner of that death which had constantly been in her thoughts for four days; and when Wynyard, impatient at last, took her chin between his finger and thumb, and turned her face towards himself, he was surprised to see how white it was, even to the lips.

"My darling," he cried, kissing her tenderly, "I did not know that you would feel this so deeply. I ought not to have told you without more preparation. How good and tender-hearted you are, thinking only of the sorrowfulness of this event, and not at all of how it affects ourselves."

"No, not so," cried Alma, wrenching her face away from his touch, with a gesture that was almost fierce. "I wish you would not interpret my feelings for me. I can't bear you to do that; I never could, you know. Let me alone to think and feel in my own way, the only way in which I can feel."

Then, seeing his surprise, she made a great effort to control herself, and added, in a calmer tone:

"I wish you would tell me more about what has happened. Never mind what I am feeling. What does that signify? No one, not even you, can understand that. Tell me the whole of what you have heard, and how your poor young cousin came to be drowned."

"Well," he said, without noticing the word "drowned," which struck him with a stupid surprise that he let pass for the moment, "if you think it reasonable to expect me to remain satisfied with not understanding your feelings, or having any share in them, I will try to go on; or stay, as we seem to have stumbled into a mood of cross-purposes, I will give you young Lawrence's letter to read, and leave you for a little while to think over it alone. I can't keep away long though, for I must start for England in another hour; and surely we have, or ought to have, a great deal to say to each other this morning, Alma. Shall I go and find Lady Rivers; she must be expecting me, and I owe her an explanation for yesterday, don't I?"

"Not yet," said Alma; "I have not told her yet. Yes, Wynyard, go away for a little while, and come back when I have read the letter."

He turned away from her, walked a few paces beyond the Judas tree, and crossing his arms on the low stone wall that divided the garden from the next field, he stood for some minutes watching the progress of a string of migratory caterpillars across the grass, determined not to let his mind fasten on any of the particulars of Alma's conduct, so as to stray into suspicion or discontent at her behaviour on this first morning of feeling her his own. She had taken him generously when he had little to give, and now that the worldly advantages lay all on his side, it would be churlish indeed to begin reckoning up the more or the less love she was likely to give in return for them.

In a shorter time than seemed necessary to read through the letters he had given her, Alma beckoned him back to the seat under the Judas tree. Lawrence's letter lay folded in her lap, her hands crossed over it. She had only read one sentence, the sentence in which Lawrence mentioned his visit to Constance, and it was with a great effort she now turned a wistful glance at Wynyard's face, dreading, yet longing to read his thought. Could he have taken in that part of the letter, and yet be so stupid, or so loyal, as not to doubt her in the least?

"Well," he said, taking her hand, and smiling in answer to her questioning look, "do we want a fresh introduction to each other, dear, or what? Is an unexpected inheritance such a very alarming thing that you can't recollect anything else about me than that? Not, for instance, that I am going away in an hour, and that it will be a week or two before we shall sit together again?"

She coloured, and left her hand passive in his, but the anxious expression remained on her face. Difficulty after difficulty, which her previous knowledge of Lord Anstice's death would surely bring her into, occurred to her busy mind, and crowded out all the tender and loving thoughts that would have been natural to the occasion.

"There are some things that I can't bear," she exclaimed, vehemently, after a long silence.

"So long as you don't tell me that I am one——"

Wynyard interrupted.

She shook her head.

"No, no, I am in earnest ; you must let me speak."

"And you must let me say first that from to-day you shall never, if I can help it, have anything to do with these unbearable things, unless indeed," he added, playfully, "*I am* one of them, which I shall begin to think, if you won't look at me."

"No, no—oh Wynyard, it is hard enough for me to say this without looking. What I feel I can't bear this morning, is the being left here with mamma after you are gone, to hear all that Madame de Florimel will say about our engagement, and my mother's talk when this news is broken to her. How little Madame de Florimel and she will understand each other. How grieved I should be if madame should guess the difference that——"

"Poor Ralph's death makes in your mother's estimation of me as a son-in-law, in fact," said Wynyard, concluding the sentence over which she hesitated.

"You must not blame poor mamma for that."

"And I do not, dearest. It is very natural, and you may depend on my burying all recollection of old slights, and taking the future complaisance I suppose I may reckon on, in good part for your sake. You have made all that easy to me. While I have the recollection of our yesterday's walk by the river to prove that you took me for myself, what care I for other people's way of looking at me ! Alma, you don't know how precious it is to me that your yielding came first. Nay, give me one of your own frank smiles at last, dearest, and let me read in your eyes the same thankfulness with which my heart overflows. I suppose I am naturally of a jealous temper, and the experiences of my first reverse of fortune have embittered me. If you had not shown me the truth and constancy of your heart yesterday, I might, I don't say I should, but I might have been so mad as never to have sought to learn it."

She tried to give him the response he asked for, but there was far more shame than joy in the tear-filled eyes, and on the trembling lips she raised to his face. Even while he kissed the tears away, a bitter impatience against his persistent dwelling on her disinterestedness, as a chief claim to his love, gnawed at her heart. She soon drew herself away from him.

"I must go to mamma," she said, "for I think you mean to let me do as I wish, and leave the château this morning, and our preparations must be begun at once. Mamma did not sleep well last night, and does not find herself comfortable in this tumble-down old house, which, she says, is full of strange noises. She will catch at the idea of escape when I tell her that you are going, and that we may make this an excuse for taking the carriage on to Aix les Bains at once, instead of resting here. You must make the best excuse for us you can to Madame de Florimel. I don't think she will be very sorry to miss our company as things stand now."

Wynyard found madame impenetrable, and disposed to be sarcastic, and, though sorry to part with her in such a mood, he was on the whole relieved that no further opportunity was given him for explanations or remonstrances that might have become embarrassing. He did not want to have Emmie West's name brought into the talk between them, and was still less disposed to receive further enlightenment as to Madame de Florimel's reasons for the distrust of Alma, which she hardly restrained within bounds of polite willingness to "speed a parting guest."

However, Madame de Florimel's manner softened at the last moment when the carriage was packed, and Wynyard came back from placing Alma in it, to repeat his hope that his cousin would be persuaded to visit Leigh some early day after he had taken up his abode there. Her eyes, which had been quite dry hitherto, suddenly filled with tears as she wrung his hand a second time.

"I am an old fool," she said, "and one would think I was twenty instead of sixty, to be ready, as I was a minute ago, to quarrel with the single member I have left of my own family, connecting me with my old English home, just from the feeling of partisanship with—well, we won't say whose cause. I suppose as long as there are young people in the world I care for, I shall want to have a finger in arranging their love affairs for them, and be bitter against them when they shut their eyes to their own good. I was made so—and—yes, after all the disappointments I have seen, I should have liked luck in

the shape of a true love to have come into the old house at last; but there, you are your mother's own son, Wynyard, and I don't know that you deserved better fortune in that way than the rest of us."

Here Alma called from the carriage, and Madame de Florimel, releasing Wynyard's hand, turned to mount the shallow, winding steps, leading to the upper story of the old house. With the vanishing of her slim, upright figure, the place all at once lost its aristocratic air, and sank down into a mere little wayside inn, with wine-carts and wood-waggon thronging the back regions, and a buzz of country business about the tree-shaded front door.

Wynyard could almost have fancied that a dream had vanished suddenly, and that all the emotions of the last twenty-four hours would pass away with it. A conviction of the reality of his own new importance came back to him, however, as soon as he was seated in the carriage, and the bustle of the departure was over. Lady Rivers's "altered eye," and the eager deferential gesture with which she made room for him to sit by her side, was as potent as a proclamation of heralds to impress his new rank on his consciousness. A real earl, and one of the richest in England, whom she had perhaps lost for her daughter through lack of fore-knowledge of what was about to happen—good heavens, could one be humble and repentant enough! The trembling fingers she laid on his arm to keep him near her when, in dread of what was coming, Wynyard drew back and muttered something about changing places with Ward on the box, had a volume of deprecation and eager apology in their clinging touch, and they could not be shaken off while Alma looked on. He had to resign himself to the front seat, and was compelled to listen to an avalanche of congratulations, explanations, flatteries, false colouring of past events, in endless repetitions, which flowed on through the whole day's drive, and broke out again, *à propos* of some new topic, as often as he thought he had quenched them, by turning the conversation to non-personal matters.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MAGNA EST VERITAS.

And I can teach thee, coz, to shame the devil,
By telling truth : Tell truth and shame the devil.

It is strange how soon when one phase of life is irrevocably broken up, breaking, as we may say, hearts with it, the shattered elements arrange themselves in a new order. The revolving wheel of moments, hours, days moves on a little more or less smoothly, but taking up the old tune, and carrying us forward to ends which, by-and-by, engage our thoughts with almost the same intensity as did those that we have had to abandon for ever.

During the first weeks after her husband's death Mrs. West could hardly have believed that she should ever again set her heart strongly on an earthly good; that any plan of life would be personally very preferable to her beyond another when he on whom all her anxiety had so long been fixed, had passed out of her sight. It was not very long, however, not a month after the funeral, before a new hope began to grow up in her mind, and shed an unexpected light on the dark future. When Sir Francis made his hasty evening visits to talk over her affairs, and sat provokingly business-like, with papers spread before him, making dismal calculations which always had the same poverty-stricken results, she would sit by, dry-eyed and acquiescent; she listened to his plans in a half-dreamy way as to something quite remote from herself and her children, fixing her thoughts all the while on the young sprouts of that new hope which, each day, seemed to grow stronger and more beautiful. Emmie go out as governess in a family, recommended by Mrs. Kirkman—the two younger boys be sent away to a cheap, distant boarding-school, while she and Mildie settled in a lodge-cottage at the gates of the Rivers's country-house, to nurse their poverty in the sight of the other family's riches! If it had been the will of God, of course one could walk through such a valley of humiliation, thankful for shelter and food and such scraps of kindness from one's prosperous relatives as might come;

if—but here Mrs. West always smiled faintly to herself, and looked across the room at Emmie. She thought she knew for certain that this valley of humiliation was not God's will for her and her children,—nor Dr. Urquhart's.

There had not been a single word said. Dr. Urquhart came less frequently than formerly into the rooms the Wests continued to occupy, he was apparently afraid of intruding upon them now that the entire house had passed into his ownership. Emmie, too, was less often invited to spend an evening in the Land of Beulah, and when an invitation came she generally excused herself, and sent delighted Mildie to study the microscope and read the "Encyclopædia Britannica" in her stead.

Mrs. West could not make out that her eldest daughter and Dr. Urquhart had ever had more than five minutes' conversation since Emmie's return from abroad; and yet the secret hope grew and grew, and was the ever-widening foundation on which all her plans for the future were built. Was it an electric glance of sympathy exchanged between the two mothers that had conveyed this certainty to Mrs. West, or was it some still more subtle inflowing of knowledge, such as will sometimes pass between persons interested in the same object, when a strong hope exists in one resolute heart? No one knew how much Emmie read the thoughts and hopes of which she was thus made the passive centre. Nothing had been said, scarcely anything looked—a kind of lull and hush of expectation pervaded the house.

Uncle Rivers came and went, and talked about another quarter-day being close at hand, and brought measurements of the rooms in the cottage, and even patterns of wall-papers for Mrs. West to choose from; but no one showed any interest in these things. Even old Mary Ann went on with the summer cleaning of her kitchen, as if she had no more idea of ever moving out, than she had had any time this last twenty years.

July stole away, and now it was the end of August. Uncle Rivers would be leaving London in another ten days or so, and yet no one seemed in a hurry to settle anything. Emmie had a little fit of impatience sometimes, and felt a longing to struggle against this quiet onflowing of the days, as if the hours, as they slipped by, were

weaving a spell round her which would become too strong for resistance if she did not rise up against it soon. She exhaled this impatience chiefly in solitary paces up and down the deserted attic rooms, and in short fits of tears when she could find a few safe minutes for weeping, without fear of provoking after remark. Any talk might have brought the suspense to an end, and Emmie did not feel ready for that yet. When Mrs. West, during the interviews with Uncle Rivers, looked across the room at her with a confiding smile on her lip which had more of appeal in it than the most moving words, Emmie kept her eyes safely glued to her work. Her heart swelled and her lips and eyelids trembled just to give the answering glance that was implored from her, but she restrained herself. An answering smile just then would mean so much, involve such a large promise—her whole life—and she could not take it back, if she had offered it to her mother, by so much only as a smile. Something withheld her constantly from giving that silent pledge.

Mrs. Urquhart meanwhile was more content with Emmie than she had been on her return home. Confidence is contagious, and sanguine-tempered people fall easily into the hopes of those they love, even against their better judgment, and Mrs. Urquhart had come to see all her son's arrangements with regard to the West family in such an amiable light that she could not help expecting them to come about sooner or later. Perhaps Emmie's coyness in the matter of her son's wooing was not altogether so displeasing in reality, as in theory it would have been. Mrs. Urquhart began to regard it as a decent diffidence to accept an undeserved honour, and to value Emmie all the more for her discerning humility. Emmie felt the silent pressure of expectation even more strongly in Mrs. Urquhart's presence than in her mother's, and was obliged to watch opportunities for flights to the attic, past the open drawing-room door, feeling it now an entrance into the stronghold of her enemies, instead of the gate to the heavenly hills as it had formerly been. From the Land of Beulah to the remotest kitchen regions the same oppressive atmosphere pervaded the house, the same anxious expectant looks were

turned upon her, claiming from her something that she was not able to give—wealth from an empty purse, water from a vessel which had been drained to its last drop.

It was only in the deserted attics, from which Christabel's easel and Katherine's desk had been long since sent away, that Emmie was able to breathe and think freely. She had all her life been better at feeling than at reasoning, and the problem rose before her in all sorts of confused and confusing forms, and had to be settled and resettled on very different counts each day. There were remorseful impulses which urged her towards the solution that would win her mother's gratitude, and put a happy termination to the family difficulties. "What was her own life," she sometimes asked herself, "compared to the good of all the others?" If she could make anyone happy, she who had made so great a mistake as to give her heart too hastily, why should she not do what she could? She knew she should feel deep gratitude to anyone who would love her, and she might love again, in a way, by-and-by. What really withheld her was an instinct of honesty and purity, rather than any counter-reasoning against this specious appearance of duty that so often presented itself.

When, one day, Mildie put into words this secret instinct, it came upon Emmie almost as a new truth, bringing unexpected strength and light. Mildie was a frequent visitor to the empty attics, for Katherine had left her a legacy of old schoolbooks, too dilapidated to bear a second packing. When she found Emmie there, she generally made a great show of not taking any notice of her. She settled herself ostentatiously with her Greek Grammar in her lap, turned her face to the wall against which her treasures were piled, and began to repeat *τύπτω, τύπτεις, τύπτει*, under her breath. It was a grievance to Emmie to have her solitary retreat invaded, and yet perhaps she received some bracing influence from the sight of that square-set, resolute figure crouched in the dust, murmuring monotonous words over and over in a tone that had a subdued relish about it.

One day Mildie found an opportunity of speaking a word or two that acted like a healthy wind in clearing Emmie's atmosphere. Mildie had borrowed a

volume of Dr. Urquhart's Encyclopædia, and, presuming basely on the complaisance with which the whole family were treated (for learning may as well get its little bit of advantage out of love follies when it can), carried it up into the attic for thorough enjoyment. On coming suddenly into the room she found Emmie standing by a table on which the book lay open, apparently reading a page. Could Emmie have taken such a sensible turn as to be reading the "Encyclopædia Britannica" by way of comfort? Alas! no. A second glance assured Mildie that she was not reading, but—oh, sacrilege—crying over the beautiful, creamy, double-margined page, actually letting slow tears fall one by one on the book itself! Mildie's exclamation of horror sent Emmie, penitent and shamefaced, to the window to wipe her tears away, and Mildie, after tenderly performing the same office for the insulted book, propped her elbows on the table and read on the tear-wet leaf, "The history of the edible green frog," over which Emmie had been weeping so profusely. When she had satisfied her thirst for knowledge, she began to wonder a little about these tears, whose traces would always distinguish the frog's biography from that of every other reptile in the volume. As she mused, piecing together little links of past observations, and arriving swiftly at a conclusion by true inductive method, a fire kindled within her, and she spoke out, taking care to make the words distinct enough for Emmie to hear, without turning her head round.

"If I were you," she began, resolving to avoid any mention of names that might be too startling for Emmie's modesty, "If I were you, I should just tell *him* the whole truth. It is the only fair thing to do, however much it may vex him, and in fact bother us all just now. Oh, yes, I know it will be bad enough for mamma and everyone; I know I shall hate living in that cottage close to the Rivers's horridly enough, unless Mrs. Kirkman's cousin would have the sense to take me for a governess instead of you. However, it's not *me* that's of consequence, and you are thinking, I know, that you are of no consequence either, and that you ought to do what is best for mamma and the children, without considering

yourself. But look here, Emmie, you *must* tell him the whole truth. I can't put it any better, but it seems to me that it would be such a mean thing to take the Encyclopædia and the house and everything that he has, and himself too, as far as that goes, and—well—not to tell him the whole truth. He might marry you if he liked afterwards, you know. But I don't think," fixing her eyes on the tear-blister, "that he would. Why should he? What would be the use of marrying a person to make her unhappy, and have her crying over his best books? No, Emmie dear, don't begin to cry again; I've done now, and I don't want you to speak a word to me ever about it, but just remember, there's one person in the family who will always stand up for you if you will speak the truth, and I'll go and be governess to Mrs. Kirkman's cousin instead of you, if that will make it any easier."

Mildie shut the Encyclopædia and marched off without waiting for an answer, but when she and Emmie met again at the dining-room door just before tea-time, Emmie surprised her by stooping down and kissing her cheek softly as they entered the room together.

After tea Emmie took the wall-paper patterns from the chimney-piece, and began to turn them over, and ask her mother's and Harry's opinion as to which pattern would best match with the old furniture, and make the little cottage-parlour look most homelike.

"Roses! had not Uncle Rivers said there were roses on the trellis outside—monthly roses that peeped in at the windows all the year round." Emmie's voice shook as she pronounced the word "roses" the first time, but it grew stronger as she went on talking; and, though Mrs. West took out her pocket-handkerchief and could not bring herself to say that the rose-bud pattern was at all pretty, the subject had been broached, and when bed-time came, everybody felt that an important step towards settling the family affairs had been taken that evening.

When a current of feeling sets definitely towards a certain course it generally happens that succeeding events are found to bring new forces to sustain and swell it. Thus it happened to Emmie that the very day after she had made her first feeble effort, an unexpectedly strong support in the resolution she had taken, came to

her. There was a letter waiting for her on the breakfast-table when she came downstairs next morning, whose appearance startled her as much as the sight of a full-blown rose in an open garden during a snow-storm, or the face of a person who had been dead a year, might have done. One is never in a hurry to open a letter that arrives very long after it is due, when all hope and expectation about it have died down into ashes in one's heart. An untimely comer like that is sure to bring renewal of pain, and had best be faced with deliberation. With this conviction Emmie put the letter into her pocket and left it there while she despatched the various items of household business that now fell to her share in the mornings. Later in the day she took it up to "Air Throne," to read it where no eyes were upon her. It was a short letter, dashed off, she felt by instinct, in a mood where resolution was mixed in some sort with impatience and pain :

"MY DEAR MISS WEST,

"Will you believe, I wonder, that the recollection of a letter of yours, left unanswered, has been a standing grievance and remorse to me for many months. Why did I not answer it? you will ask. Well, chiefly because I thought I had no right to impose on you the task of keeping a secret which I must have told you if I had written, and which a person, whose equal concern it is, had decided to keep silence upon for a while. My tongue is loosened now, and I will tell you at once that I am engaged, have been engaged for nearly four months, to your cousin, Alma Rivers, and that we shall probably be married very shortly after her return to England in September. The wedding will be in London; but Lady Rivers is coming with her daughter to Leigh for a short visit first, and I am trying to persuade Madame de Florimel to meet them there, and remain to stand by me on the great day. Up to the present moment, I am sorry to say, she remains obstinate against leaving her vineyards at La Roquette to ripen without the help of her watching. This is all preliminary to the real object of my letter, which I find must after all be entered upon bluntly, if entered upon at all. I am guilty towards you in another

matter than that of the long-unanswered letter, and I have reflected that since, if I had injured or misled a man in a small thing or a great, I should owe it to him to acknowledge my fault in so many words, I owe the same openness to you, though in matters of feeling between men and women such outspokenness is not, I believe, usual. I think it ought to be. If I blunder in writing this and make my fault worse, forgive me. It is written in utter reverence for your sincerity and purity of nature; from a conviction that with such as you, truth never rankles as does falsehood or misunderstanding. Let us face the truth together then. I made a mistake last spring in letting you see feelings which, though very real at the time, were hasty, and awakened during a misconception of the position in which I stood towards another person. What I have to say is, don't let your belief in truth and sincerity, or, above all, in your own worth, be lessened through my fault. I submit that I ought to be lowered in your estimation. You cannot suppose my esteem for you greater than it is, and the false colouring came through me. I know your disposition to undervalue yourself, and I also know from past experience how prone we 'Air people' are, when the light of life happens to burn low, to translate everything into excuses for self-torture and self-contempt. That is why I have ventured on a confession of sins which may perhaps make it clearer to you than your humility would otherwise allow, on whose shoulders the blame of our spoilt spring memories falls. When the shadow has quite passed away from them, we shall meet on the friendly old footing. Meanwhile I have had a long letter from my friend Casabianca, and I am glad to find that he has sensible views upon the rabbit-warrens at Leigh, and considers that next Christmas holidays will be a suitable season for his introduction to their numerous population; we shall perhaps be able to persuade your mother to journey northwards earlier than that. You see I count so certainly on your forgiveness that I look forward to being received as a useful cousin by all the members of your family by-and-by.

"Always yours,

"WYNYARD ANSTICE."

Emmie folded up the letter and put it back into its envelope long before the half-hour she had given herself for solitude was over, and when Mildie came upstairs to look for her, she found her on her knees in a corner, turning over Katherine Moore's legacy of books, to choose such as were worth carrying away for Sidney's and Mildie's use at the cottage. "For," she observed, in answer to Mildie's exclamation of wonder, "if we are to make ready for the sale and to pack up in ten days, it is quite time that we set ourselves to work in earnest."

Mildie took the books out of her sister's hands, declaring that this sort of thing was her business; but her eyes followed Emmie about the room while she dragged forward the old furniture which had served the Moores, and wondered whether mamma could get reconciled to using it at the cottage.

"Ah, here is the skeleton's box," Emmie said; "we will make a cover for it out of the old school-room curtains, and put it in the bow-window Uncle Rivers talked about, for a seat. It will remind you of the Moores, and of the evening when we all sat talking round their fire before I went to Eccleston Square."

Mildie could scarcely believe her ears when Emmie made this allusion to the past; it was the first she had been heard to utter since their troubles began. Something had certainly changed her, Mildie thought; her lips actually wore a smile, sad, perhaps, but not down-hearted, and her face and figure, as she stood in the sunlight, had an alertness and life which had been sadly wanting of late. Mildie, who had her fancies at times, in spite of her devotion to the *Encyclopædia*, thought that her sister looked just then like a slender monthly rose-tree that, after being beaten about and drenched in a storm, raises its branches, and opens its wet blossoms to the comforting of the first sunbeam.

Later on in the day, after a great deal of business had been got through, Emmie took out her letter again and read it once more. It had done her quite as much good as the writer hoped it would, and he had shown his knowledge of her nature, if not of the female heart in general, by writing. To Emmie there was an immense strength and rest in that one clear word spoken. She

had been tormenting herself with the self-blame and indefinable shame, which enters so largely into the pain women feel, when they have given more or less love in return for a seeking which has not had its legitimate conclusion. A true word would often do much to dispel this torture, to put things in their real light, and give them their true proportion; an honest word of explanation or confession, recognising the woman's right to be surprised or wounded, and her just claim to be treated seriously in the most serious matter of her life. Emmie had got this honest word, so seldom, in such circumstances, offered, and though it left everything just as it was before, and had not removed a single thorn from the path before her, it had altered the whole complexion of her thought, and made quite bearable what had once seemed an overwhelming pain. She read her letter straight through once more in the twilight, while her mother was downstairs talking to Sir Francis Rivers; then she locked it up in her desk, in a secret drawer, seldom opened, resolving, as she did so, that she would not be ashamed of having loved a generous man who acknowledged that he had sought her too hastily, and who was not to blame for the change of circumstances that had drifted them apart. She could soon learn now to look back, without regret, on something that might have been, but which was not ordered, and therefore could not have been best. And since she knew now, by experience, that truth did not rankle, like mistakes or misunderstanding, she determined that she would act on this knowledge, and tell the whole truth, however hard it might be to speak it, when an occasion came.

During the following week, while preparations for the removal and the sale went on, Emmie began to hope that the dreaded occasion would not come. It was a miserable, hurried, tearful, noisy time, and did not need any fresh complications to make it worse. The boys were at home for the autumn holidays, and could not be restrained from getting a good deal of boisterous fun out of the topsy-turvy state of the house, or from dragging forward recovered treasures, with inconvenient reminiscences of the jolly time "when this was new." These reminiscences would often send Mrs. West back into a tearful state of

clinging affection to impracticable articles of furniture, just when Harry and Mildie had brought her to see that the selection of goods must be made on strict principles of suitability to their new home, and not with regard to the memories connected with them—that, for example, a bureau six feet wide might have belonged to Mr. West's grandfather, and held his school letters for thirty years, and would, nevertheless, not fit into a two-foot recess in the cottage. On these occasions Mrs. Urquhart was the great resource, and constantly had to be fetched, to administer advice and comfort. Emmie was obliged to consent to her being summoned, though her conscience smote her sorely every time, for she felt that the style of reasoning which brought Mrs. West round, and induced her to allow the household god in question to be marked with the fatal ticket, ought to draw forth a protest from her which she never could bring herself to speak. "What does it matter?" Mrs. Urquhart would say, encouragingly. "Yes, yes, my dear Mrs. West, let the man put the bureau, and even Mr. West's arm-chair, and the nursery cupboard you bought when Harry was six weeks old, into the sale-list; it will be quite easy for Graham to buy in anything you particularly fancy when the time comes. You have only just to give him a hint, and he will manage it all for you. He is used to managing." And then there would be a triumphant glance towards Emmie, and she felt that, let her look as gravely irresponsible as she might, Mrs. Urquhart's confidence in Graham's power to manage all things as he wished, was not in the least shaken.

Everyone was to leave the house the day before the sale; Dr. and Mrs. Urquhart on a flying visit into Devonshire, and the Wests to Eccleston Square, where they were to remain during Lady Rivers's and Alma's absence at Leigh, till the arrangements for their final departure from London were completed. Casabianca was not above consoling himself with vaunts about the grandeur of Eccleston Square, when his friend, Tom Winter, came to say good-bye, and, in consequence, had his ears boxed by poor Harry, who was too sore at heart on that last evening to give in to any nonsense. Emmie came to the door of Iduna's Grove at the sound of con-

tention, and looked in, meaning to remonstrate; but the sight of Harry's set face, and of Casabianca sobbing under the table, for he had only blustered, poor boy, to keep up a sinking heart a few moments longer, sent her silently away. If Harry were to say anything to her—he had been very good hitherto, and had only once remarked casually, that for aught he could see, Dr. Urquhart was as good a fellow as any going—if he should begin to urge anything upon her, on this last evening of coming home to his own house, Emmie did not know what promises she might not be induced to make. Sir Francis Rivers was in the dining-room, sympathetic, but evidently very glad that it had come to the last day, and that the press of disagreeable business was nearly over for him. He hailed Emmie from the hall, and though he could not fail to see the tears in her eyes, he looked at her with that same complacent expression with which other people plagued her. Not that *he* was thinking of Dr. Urquhart; he had given up all hope of Dr. Urquhart from the moment when he had received definite orders for the printing of the sale bills, but, lurking in a corner of his mind, he had a little scheme of his own invention, which struck him as so clever, and yet at the same time so strange for him to have thought of, that he could not help smiling to himself whenever it recurred to him.

"Ah, little woman," he said, chucking Emmie under her pretty dimpled chin, "you have no idea what a battle I have just come out of on your account. I have bearded an angry lioness enraged on behalf of her only cub; yes, bearded her in her own golden cage, that I never thought to enter again, and would not, to serve anyone but you. Such an avalanche of words, such a fluttering of enormous fans, such a slamming of doors in my face by gorgeous footmen! You guess rightly—Mrs. Kirkman; but don't look frightened, my dear, it's all right, and I ought not to say a word. She has a right to be very angry, poor woman, and I have found her more reasonable about you than might have been expected. You always have pleased her fancy it seems, and, however much her opinion of your relations has changed, you are of another sort, she opines, from your despicable kindred

in Eccleston Square, and she is not disposed to withdraw her recommendation. You are to have the honour of governing her cousin's children all the same. Who knows what may come of it, eh, Emmie?"

"The Christopher Kirkmans live a long way off," put in Mrs. West, mournfully, "and Emmie has never lived in the north; I wonder how the climate will agree with her?"

"Your own county," cried Sir Francis. "It will be native air to her; and the elder Kirkmans have a place near Wigton, where they will probably spend the autumn. I have done the best I could for you, and I should not wonder if Emmie acknowledges some day that my plans work better than her aunt's, after all."

Sir Francis finished his cup of tea, and took his departure soon after this. The house began to grow dusky, for no one had the heart to light the gas, only to show the tickets on the furniture and the sorrowful signs of speedy departure lurking everywhere. In the Land of Beulah alone all remained as spruce and bright as usual, and Mrs. Urquhart and Graham had lighted the chandelier and were taking their tea as if nothing particular was to happen to-morrow morning.

Emmie stood at the curtainless dining-room window, watching the gas-lamps in the street as they started into radiance one after the other under the touch of the lamp-lighter's wand. Whilst she was recalling the days when, every evening before going to bed, she and Harry used to climb the dining-room chairs to see this grand sight, with faint delightful sensations of awe, as at something magical and unexplained, her mother came in softly, and stood beside her.

"Darling," she whispered, putting an arm round her waist, "I did not like you to be startled, so I came in first to prepare you a little. Dr. Urquhart has asked if he may come and speak to you this evening, and I said that you were alone in the dining-room. Was I right? Emmie dear, he has been very good to us all."

"Yes," said Emmie, after a moment's pause, "he has been good to us, he is a good friend; but, please,

I will go myself and speak to him in the Land of Beulah; I won't give him the trouble of coming down here."

Mrs. West had knowledge enough of heart affairs to perceive that there was no good augury for Dr. Urquhart in this, and unconsciously she tightened her clasp of Emmie's waist, till it became an almost despairing clutch. She had so hoped that this support was going to be the prop for all their fallen fortunes; it was very hard to give up the last hope, yet she spoke in all sincerity from the depths of her yearning mother's heart when she said in faltering tones: "You know, darling, there is nothing I care for so much as your happiness."

"Yes, I know," Emmie whispered.

"I am very anxious you should judge rightly what is best for yourself, and for us all in this matter. There is no one else who loves you?"

"No," said Emmie, meekly, "no one else."

"Then, my dear, think a little. We have known him so long, and he is very good and kind, and he would be such a friend and protector for the boys. Dearest, I can enter into your feelings, for I know how it was with me when my mother came, in a day of trouble like this in my old home, and told me that Mr. West was in the drawing-room, and that he had made a very handsome offer to my father about me. I don't mind now telling you, Emmie, that it was not exactly what I had been expecting, and I had at first a little, just a little, struggle with myself. Yet you know how it all turned out, and how united we were. I don't think he ever felt any want of duty or love in me, through all our years of trial. Look back as far as you can recollect, dear child: there was never any strife in our home, was there? I have failed in many things, but I don't think I could have done more for him, or lived in greater peace, if I had begun by being ever so much, what foolish people call, in love."

Mrs. West drew Emmie's head down upon her shoulder as she finished speaking. Listening thus to her mother's anxious heart-beats, Emmie *did* look back through the years. She followed herself in thought backwards to earliest, earliest recollections of father and

mother, trying hard to see what her mother wanted her to see, for just then she wished to yield, her mother's pleading had touched her so closely. Why was it that the pictures, as they rose, *would* convey warning rather than encouragement? Certainly there had been peace in the house, but had it not been a dead sort of peace? Emmie remembered days, before their troubles began, when the children and their mother had had merry games together in this very room, in the twilight, and how all the noise and mirth and chatter had died out when papa's knock was heard at the door. It was the master of the house who entered always, and everybody was ready to wait upon him; but the gaiety and fun and endearments of the previous hours were put away. Harry and she used to wonder whether papa might not have been better pleased if mamma had laughed and talked with him as she did to them, instead of becoming so grave and silent all at once. When the troubles came, if there had been warmth and life in the house as well as duty and peace—such warmth, such life as strong mutual love can create—would poverty have seemed so very terrible? Could her father have felt that all his self-respect and dignity were gone when his riches failed him, if there had ever been a time when love had crowned him king? Emmie was not judging her mother, who had given all that was in her power to give. There had been nothing wrong, except, perhaps, the *yielding*, which Emmie herself had been very near to, a minute ago.

"Mamma," she said at last, "if papa had never had any troubles, should you have been quite happy?"

"The troubles were needed," Mrs. West answered, "and—yes—they drew us closer together. I don't deny, dear, that we might never have understood one another so well, if we had remained prosperous always."

"But perhaps Dr. Urquhart will never have any troubles. He will be always bright and confident, and full of things as he is now. Mamma, let me go upstairs, please, and don't be angry with me if, when I have told him the whole truth, it is settled in the way you do not wish."

Mrs. Urquhart and Graham were very much surprised when Emmie appeared at the drawing-room door,

looking, Mrs. Urquhart said afterwards, very much as if she had come to have a tooth out, the silly, frightened child. Mrs. Urquhart thought that Mrs. West had blundered the message, and she was disposed, as she gathered up her knitting to chuckle inwardly at the thought of Emmie's after confusion, when she found she had come upstairs to have an offer made to her. Graham, however, bit his lip, and in spite of his confidence and his cheery temper, turned almost as white as Emmie when he saw who it was that was standing in the doorway. He felt in an instant what a different thing a talk in his mother's brightly-lighted drawing-room would be from that interview in the twilight downstairs, for which he had prepared himself.

Emmie was the most self-possessed of the three, as she stood, her hands clasped before her, and said, looking appealingly at Mrs. Urquhart: "Mamma told me you wished to see me, and so I have come up myself to say good-bye to you both this last evening. I did not want to give you the trouble of coming downstairs."

"My dear! I have not been thinking of coming downstairs," answered Mrs. Urquhart, implacably. "I was just going into the next room to fetch a fresh strip of knitting. There, there, sit down in my chair, my dear! Make yourself comfortable till I come back. I don't like to hear of last evenings, and don't mean to believe in them."

Emmie's eyes wistfully followed Mrs. Urquhart strewing her worsted balls in a long train as she went, but there was no going back now, and it would soon be over. She did not even regret that she had come when she saw how agitated Dr. Urquhart grew, and how rapidly he thrust his fingers through his hair, to get himself ready to begin. In the Land of Beulah, which had so often been a haven of rest to her, she felt that she should have courage to remain faithful. She would not be the one to bring the shadow which had brooded over the rest of the house in here.

Dr. Urquhart soon took courage to come a little nearer, and stood facing her, while she sat motionless looking down at her clasped hands. He wished that the dear, dark-fringed eyelids would tremble a little, or the

sweet lips part into ever such a faint smile; it was so hard to speak to such a seemingly motionless statue.

"Miss West," he began at last; he would have called her "Emmie" in the twilight downstairs, but seated in his mother's chair, with the full gaslight on her face, she was much more formidable. His natural hopefulness came to his aid, however, and the plunge once made, he pleaded his cause fluently enough, telling how he had begun by watching her, and thinking about her, and how the knowledge that she was his love had flashed full grown into his mind one evening, and had never been absent one moment since, from his thoughts and his purposes. It was a little love history that might well have won a girl's ear; but Emmie was not exactly listening to it, she was so wishing that the end would come, and, almost against her will, recalling another face and another voice, that had softened in speaking to her—not so true, alas! but ah, how much more dear! She wished Dr. Urquhart would not seem to think that nothing was necessary but to convince her of the truth of his love, as if hers was due in return, as a matter of course. Why would he take it for granted that to be very much loved by someone was all that a woman could possibly want? It made the explanation that must soon be entered upon, much more difficult.

At length it came to the question needing an answer.

"Since I love you so well, will you not be my wife, and make us all happy?"

Then Emmie's dark eyelashes trembled, and she raised her eyes to his, frightened, but resolute.

"I will tell you the whole truth."

"Yes, do," he said, as yet not alarmed, confident even, that a true-hearted confession, if it did begin with a few difficulties, would only lead to victory in the end. "There is nothing I wish so much as that we should be quite open with each other; I have told you how I came to love you, and that it is the only love that ever has entered or shall enter my heart."

"But I am so sorry," said Emmie, 'her uplifted eyes now filling with tears, "I am so sorry, for, Dr. Urquhart,

I don't love you, though I know how kind you are, and how happy it would make mamma, and how good it would be for everyone if I did. It is very ungrateful of me, but I must tell you the truth, must I not?"

"But your mother——"

"Yes," said Emmie, sorrowfully, "I am afraid mamma misled you a little; I ought to have spoken to her sooner, but I will tell you the truth. Sometimes, while we have all been so unhappy, and there has been talk of our leaving London, I have thought of saying 'yes,' if you asked me, just to make a home for mamma, and my brothers and sister; but you would not like it to be in that way, would you?"

Emmie turned her eyes away as she finished speaking, unable to bear the sight of the sudden pallor and anguish that overspread the face into which she had been looking. She heard some quick, gasping breaths, and saw that Dr. Urquhart raised his hand to the chimney-piece to steady himself. After a while he said in a hoarse voice——

"But are you sure,—think again; are you *sure* that it was only for your mother's and sister's sake? Is my love nothing to yourself—*nothing at all*? Think again—you cannot mean quite that."

"Oh! I am sorry, I am sorry!" groaned Emmie; "but there is no use in my thinking again. I have thought so much about it already, and I do mean what I have said. I am telling you the real truth—I thought I ought. Please do not be unhappy, I am not worth so much regret. I am a very silly girl, and full of fancies——"

"Fancies—you mean that there is someone else,—but does he love you as I do?"

"No," said Emmie, covering her face with her hands, "he does not love me at all. Don't let us talk of that. I told you, to show you that you must not waste any more thought on me; but nobody else will ever know. Let me go downstairs now to mamma. You don't know how hard it has been to me to tell you this."

The colour came back into Dr. Urquhart's face, and there was a strange flashing in his eyes of mingled tears, and burning, indignant anger. The man who had trifled

with Emmie West's love would not have been in a very good position if he had come before him just then. It was all he could do to prevent himself from bursting forth into execration; it seemed such a cruel, miserable thing to have won her from him for nothing.

Emmie got up in the silence that followed, and held out her hand to say good-bye. He took it, but could not let it go again immediately. He knew that it was almost as bad as inflicting unnecessary torture on a suffering creature to go on questioning her, and yet with the prospect of to-morrow's departure, and of the utter emptiness in the house, and in his heart afterwards, he could not resist urging another plea.

"Time," he began; "you must let me hope in what time can do; you will come to think more kindly of me by-and-by. I will not give up all hope just yet."

"But you had better," said Emmie, gently. "If you did persuade me to give you a different answer from that which I have given you to-day, that would not make it right; I should give it more or less from the reasons I told you of, and it would not be well for you in the end. When someone you have come to love, tells you she loves you with all her heart, you will be glad that I spoke the truth to you to-day."

"Why should I change more than you? You would marry that other one, even though he does not love you as I do!"

"No, I would not," said Emmie, with a little glow rising in her cheek; "I would not let him do for me what I will not do for you. And you must not think or speak about that again, please."

The momentary sting of anger gave her courage to draw away her hand and turn to the door. Dr. Urquhart followed, full of penitence and shame for having brought that flush of pain to her cheek.

"Forgive me! it is so hard to part when we have lived near each other so long, and when you have been all the world to me. Oh! Miss West, surely the other is a passing fancy, you called it a fancy yourself; surely you can look back to a time when you thought more—kindly of me?"

Emmie stood for a minute with her hand on the door,

and looked back into the bright Land of Beulah, where she had spent so many happy hours, and which, in its comfort and homeliness, was such a contrast to the desolate rest of the house to-night. To leave it was like turning away from a haven of security to battle with storms outside, but she was too truthful and single-minded to deceive herself. It was *not* of Dr. Urquhart she had been used to think when she came up here in the dusky afternoons last winter, to sit in the fire-glow, and dream her girlish dreams, while Mrs. Urquhart nodded in her arm-chair. It was not his face that looked out of the dark corners in the guise of some romance hero whose fortunes she thought herself following; not his voice that said all the fine or tender things; she might be ever so much ashamed, now she knew whose likeness it was that had given reality to every pleasant tale; but she could not deceive herself into believing that it was someone else's, or set up a new image for worship because it was convenient to do so.

"I have always thought kindly of you, but not in the way you mean. No, not once," she added, with an emphatic, sorrowful shake of the head, that shattered Dr. Urquhart's confidence, and froze his hopes more than all her previous words had done. It was all over then; he saw the door open and shut behind her, without attempting another word. And when Mrs. Urquhart came back a few minutes later, smiling and confident, though a little surprised that the interview had lasted so short a time, she found him seated at his writing-table with his face buried in his hands, and had no need to ask any questions.

It was a great blow, all the greater because it was the first failure in his successful, hard-working life, yet the first bitter hour had hardly passed before the wholesomeness of the maxim on which Emmie had acted, began to be verified in him. Truth does not rankle if it is accepted bravely, and he soon began to be thankful that it was a bitter truth he had to take into his life, and not a fair deception. Emmie had judged him rightly; it was the reality of love he wanted, not its pale counterfeit, heart-understanding and comradeship, if any at all,

to bear him through an anxious life. Even before he had brought himself to repeat one or two of her bitter truths to his mother, Emmie's prophecy had a dawning of fulfilment, and he acknowledged to himself that if things were so, she had done well by him to be so pitilessly truthful.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

DISCORDS.

In Love, if Love be Love, if love be ours,
Faith and unfaith can ne'er be equal powers.
Unfaith in aught is want of faith in all.

It is the little rift within the lute,
That, by-and-by, will make the music mute,
And, ever widening, slowly silence all.

"THIS great Babylon that I have builded;" these words rushed into Alma's mind, as she stood by her mother on the terrace overlooking the gardens at Leigh, on the day after their arrival, and noticed the smile of perfect satisfaction on Lady Rivers's face. Lord Anstice had brought out his guests after dinner to look at the sunset from the terrace facing westward, where visitors were customarily taken on summer evenings, to enjoy the wide expanse of view, and the glow on the distant hills. Lady Rivers could not by any means keep her eyes so far afield, however, it was the near prospect that interested her. The garden-terraces, one below the other, ablaze with autumn flowers, the fountains sending up showers of jewels in the evening light, the glimpses of park, and groups of antlered deer, beyond the gardens, the two stately avenues of oaks that might be traced to the entrance-gates, a mile or two away in opposite directions; the massive white house behind, from which they had just come. "Not perhaps so showy, and complete in every detail as Golden Mount, but oh! what a different air it has, *how* preferable!" The remark was whispered to Alma when Wynyard turned aside to take a letter the servant brought him, but Lady Rivers's whispers were rather in the stage fashion, and Alma felt sure that he caught the words "Golden

Mount" at least; it was the second time to-day that Lady Rivers had brought out that unfortunate comparison in his presence. The first time he had laughed good-humouredly, and glanced openly at Alma, as if expecting her to share his amusement, but now his face grew grave, and he walked off to the other end of the terrace, with his letter in his hand, to look at the sunset by himself. Did he, Alma wondered, go away out of consideration for her, to give Lady Rivers time to exhale all her raptures over the scene, at a safe distance from his ears, and so spare her confusion, or was he really disgusted? Was he busy just now, as Alma often suspected him to be, in reasoning or scolding himself back into toleration? She had fallen into a way of watching him whenever they were together, and speculating about his thoughts, and this did not conduce to ease on either side, or to the confidence that surely ought to have been established now that they were within a month of the wedding-day.

So many unfortunate allusions to the time of the Kirkman intimacy were always dropping either from Lady Rivers, or from Sir Francis's tactless lips, that Alma could not keep her thoughts from working round them, and sometimes she never lifted her eyes to her lover's face for a whole day, but to look for a change in it, to wonder when the dawn of the first suspicion would show itself there. If she could but have been her real self to him, if only she had not had "the little grain of conscience" to make her sour, all might have been well. Only that very day she had vexed and disappointed him twice,—the day that she had meant to be such a triumphant, white day,—on which he had brought such warmth of welcome to their meeting. She had surprised him disagreeably at the moment of being taken by him to the morning-room, hereafter to be her own, by refusing sharply to sit down and write the first note ever written at her new writing-table, to Madame de Florimel, to invite her to come to the wedding. An hour before dinner she had vexed him again, by drawing back when he wanted to introduce her to an old London friend of his, a watchmaker, who was spending a little time at Leigh, and was at that moment enjoying a hunt for

butterflies in the kitchen-garden. "Why could she not have humoured him?" she asked herself now. He had so evidently wanted to get her to himself, away from her mother's raptures which had been wearying enough all day; why could she not have pleased him, by being civil to the old man? There was nothing against it, but the vague suspicion that haunted her about everything or person connected with her own or Wynyard's life during the last few months, lest it or he should prove a snare beneath her feet, or a witness confronting her with some question that would bring her to shame. Now he had carried away the odious belief that she was vulgar enough to be ashamed of the time of his poverty, and jealous of the friends he had made then,—that was the interpretation he would put upon her unwillingness to talk about the events of the last year; he would explain the cloud that must always hang over that passage of their mutual lives so, and she could never justify herself, though she knew the extent to which it would lower her in his estimation.

By-and-by, Wynyard having finished reading his note, came back to them, and they walked up and down the terrace together, whilst he pointed out the chief features of the prospect to Lady Rivers. The mausoleum in the far distance, among the tallest and oldest yew-trees in the county; the ugly squat obelisk erected by some crazy Lord Anstice of a few generations back, in memory of a favourite hunter; "My Lady's Folly," whose cost had laid the last straw on the load of debt that had overwhelmed Madame de Florimel's branch of the family.

"Alma could have her folly if she liked," Lady Rivers smilingly supposed, without any danger now of involving the family estates; the late Lord Anstice's hoards would be proof against any number of follies."

"Well, I am glad you like it all," Wynyard observed, when there was a breathing space in Lady Rivers's praises. "I can't say so much myself. I have always thought the place rather ugly than otherwise, and wish that my uncle had left the old house standing. However, we shall see what the future will do. 'Times change by the rood,' don't they, Alma? Now that Sir Gilbert du Bois 'has lots of food and firewood,' his desolate tower may

hope to get a new character. How can it help that," he added, in a lower tone, for he caught a look of vexation on Alma's face, "when the maiden 'with wonderful eyes, too, under her hood' comes into it at last?"

They had reached a side entrance, and Lady Rivers proposed to go in, but Wynyard drew Alma back, as she was following, and pleaded for another turn or two, "unless she was tired, or," he added quickly, "unless she had had enough of his company for one day."

Alma silently slipped her hand under his arm, but did not look up till quite a minute after, and then her eyes were full of tears. Wynyard led her to a seat under the shelter of a protecting buttress.

"Now you are going to tell me what is the matter," he said. "There has been a shadow between us all day; and, Alma, don't you think it is time for us to get out of our company armour, offensive and defensive, and be ourselves to each other? We can't live in it, can we? Yet, dearest, though I have watched and watched, ready, I think, to help you out, if you would give the least sign, I don't believe you have shown me your true self since that one hour by the river on our journey, which I thought was to begin so much happiness, such perfect trust. How is it? I don't think it is my fault; but if you think it is, just tell me."

"You should not speak as you did just now. You should not have said that about Sir Gilbert du Bois to mamma and me. Wynyard, don't you think I know you well enough to read your secret thoughts when you say things of that sort about sudden changes of fortune, however smilingly you may say them? It is not all play, or at all events it is a play that hurts me."

"Then I am sorry; you shall not have to complain again. But, Alma dear, why are you so sensitive? In a few days more, remember, we shall be one, not two, and the past will be a common possession. Surely our relations are sound enough for us to permit ourselves our little jokes and allusions to bygone troubles that have been utterly blown away? You cannot think I seriously suspect you of having changed with my fortune? Should we be sitting here if I did? Have I not your own word, given me on that last day of my old life, that you loved

me and were faithful to me, through all the time when others tried to divide us? If a drop of gall sometimes oozes into my talk, it ought not to touch *you*. Look me in the face, dear, and let me see that it never will again; show me that you have put yourself too entirely on my side, to be hurt personally by what I say in jest or earnest about that old cause of bitterness. Nay," he added, when Alma did not look up, "I am not asking for any new assurances of love, though perhaps I think I get rather less of these than I might look for, considering my long fast, and what is coming next month. But I won't be exacting. I am satisfied with those few words by the river. Only look me once more in the face, dear Alma, and before it is too dark to see, let me read in your eyes—the dear eyes that had such frank kindness in them for me once—that there is not really any doubt between us, not so much as that you shall ever again fancy that I doubt you."

Alma heard a quick, impatient sigh, while she was debating within herself whether or not she dare look up, and reveal all the trouble there must be in her face. Before she had made up her mind, Wynyard ended the suspense by jumping up from his seat, as if he could bear her hesitation no longer.

"You will tell me at your own time," he said, gravely; "or, perhaps," hesitating as if waiting to be contradicted, "it will be better to make up our minds to let the past be past. I will cure myself of making bitter allusions—there, it is a promise—and you—but, no, I will make no conditions. I will wait for the old dear openness and confidence to come back as they must, a thousandfold dearer for the new ties. One does not get any good by tearing one's rosebuds open. Let us walk to the end of the terrace, the sun is all but gone down, and the one time when this view is worth anything is while the outlines of those distant, low hills show clear against the after-glow in the west. Poor Ralph made a sketch of the sunset here, which was one of the best things he ever did; I'll show it you when we go in."

While they stood watching the changes in the sky, Wynyard talked pleasantly enough about the best situation for Alma's easel to stand in when it arrived, her

choice of a music-room, her wishes and pleasure on this or that little household matter. It sounded quite natural talk between an engaged pair, a month before the wedding-day, and would have satisfied Lady Rivers; but Alma knew Wynyard too well not to detect the slight frost of manner, so unlike his usual attitude towards those he loved, and which she felt put her further away than another person's sullen silence would have done.

When they re-entered the house, Wynyard said, doubtfully:

"There is another visit I wanted you to make to-day, but it is a painful one; you will be too tired, it had better wait till to-morrow."

"Tell me about it now. Is it to someone in this house?"

"To Mrs. Anstice, poor Ralph's mother. I want you to see her, and if you can find an opportunity, say something to her about its being your wish as well as mine, that this house should remain virtually her own, as long as she wants it."

"She is to live here, then?"

"Where else? She has no other home, and as poor Ralph always liked her to be here, she clings to the place as a link with him; she must not be disturbed."

"Don't let mamma hear anything about it, then."

"Why not?"

"She does not believe in two women being able to live in one house."

"Well, it will not be for long. The house was hers a little while ago, and would no doubt be hers still, if Ralph had made a will. It is not in the entail, and could have been given absolutely to her, as my uncle once meant to give it to me."

"But I thought she was a very disagreeable woman, with whom no one could get on."

"She is very ill and broken-hearted now. Don't go to see her to-night, however, unless you wish it. She expects you, but you can do as you like."

"Of course I will go," said Alma, hurt at the tone the conversation had taken. "I was not making objections on my own account."

And then she followed silently, while Wynyard led

the way, up a staircase and along several galleries hung with pictures, to the distant wing of the house, where the apartments occupied by Mrs. Anstice since her son's death, were situated. He was thinking all the time of that evening when Ralph had surprised him in his chambers, and talked of Alma. How angry he had been at his cousin's proposal to resign the house and estate and his mother to the joint management of himself and Alma, while he travelled. And now here they were, undertaking the task, all exactly as Ralph had planned it (he himself, poor fellow, banished); but, under what different circumstances, in what a different frame of mind, too, from anything he (Wynyard) could have imagined at the time. As he looked back to his feelings on that evening, he could hardly believe he had been on the point of saying to Alma a minute ago, that if she objected to living in the same house with Mrs. Anstice, the wedding could be put off till after Mrs. Anstice's death, and that he had only restrained himself from a fear of giving the first vent to a crowd of secret discontents which he had resolved not to allow to come to the front, but to smother for the sake of future peace.

Alma broke the silence when he paused to lift the heavy curtain which shut off the passage leading to the sick-room from the rest of the house.

"Has Mrs. Anstice no relation or friend of her own with her? She must feel very solitary in this big house when you are away."

"She has a friend with her to-day; and, by-the-way, a young lady you must know something of. You have often, I suppose, met the two sisters who lived in your aunt's house in Saville Street, Katherine and Christabel Moore?"

"Are they here?" exclaimed Alma, in a tone which certainly did not betray much pleasure. "What can they have to do with Mrs. Anstice!"

"Not much, perhaps, but they were spending a few weeks at Abbot's Leigh in the spring, and Mrs. Anstice met one of the sisters in the park near the mausoleum. They got into talk somehow. I think Mrs. Anstice turned faint and Miss Moore helped her back into her bath-chair. Since then, my aunt has shown more pleasure in their society than in anything else."

"Do *they* live here, too, in the house?"

"Oh no! They left Abbot's Leigh two months or more ago, and are now lodging with my old watch-making friend, David Macvie, at Barnsby. It seems that old Macvie bought a business at Barnsby a little while since, and these two sisters followed in his wake I suppose; there was always some curious sort of link between them."

"It gives one an eerie kind of feeling to hear of so many former acquaintances turning up in our new home."

"Katherine Moore is an acquaintance worth keeping, at any rate. She has been spending a few days with Mrs. Anstice, but goes back with David to-night."

The windows of the room they entered were already closed and curtained, but there was a shaded lamp on a table by a sofa, on which the invalid lay. Its rays showed Alma a pale, haggard face turned towards the door to greet her. Wynyard took her up to the sofa, and her hands were laid hold of, by two thin feverish hands, and, almost before she was aware the sick lady had drawn her down, and kissed her on the forehead. Wynyard pushed a chair forward within the circle of the lamp-light, and Alma sat down, uncomfortably conscious of two large hungry eyes exploring her face as though to find out if there was any promise of help there, for a wounded soul. Alma wished the ordeal over, and yet when Mrs. Anstice turned away from her at last, and when she saw how the hollow eyes softened as they rested upon Wynyard's face, she had a curious sense of having been weighed in the balance and found wanting.

While Mrs. Anstice talked to Wynyard, Alma had leisure to notice the other occupants of the room. A young lady in black sat working at the end of the sofa. She looked up and answered when Wynyard addressed her, but kept in the background till the conversation was interrupted by a violent fit of coughing on Mrs. Anstice's part; then she came forward to raise the sufferer's pillows, and, when the paroxysm was over, remained supporting her, stroking back the hair with skilful fingers, whose touch seemed to have a mesmeric power of soothing. That then was Katherine Moore, whose name used to come so often into Emmie West's talk, and

against whom Alma had felt in old times just enough antagonism, to make her reappearance in this new sphere a disagreeable *contretemps*. As the frown of suffering passed from Mrs. Anstice's face, a gentler expression stole over it, and a glance of gratitude transfigured her sad eyes into momentary beauty.

"See," she said, turning to Wynyard as soon as she could speak, "Miss Christabel Moore has sent me another little picture to-day. I like it better than any of the others I have had from her, though they all comfort me. You may take it into your hand, and look at it, if you like."

The picture referred to, rested against a small frame upon the table, and when Wynyard had examined it he passed it on to Alma. She had noticed it before, as it stood in the full lamplight, and had wondered at its beauty, thinking that the delicate colouring and the radiant glory on the central figure reminded her of some of Blake's drawings. A closer inspection confirmed the impression. The picture was contained within a circle not larger than might have served for an initial letter; but, small as it was, there was a wonderful amount of delicate work in it, curves melting into curves and exquisite colour into colour. The lower part of the picture expressed vaguely, dark, rolling water just touched by a light that, further off, grew brighter, illuminating the shore, upon which there stood a slender, youthful figure, with upturned face and outstretched hands, holding a cross, and raising it towards a yet stronger light overhead. The whole atmosphere of the picture was full of light and peace and hope, and yet, in the wonder of the face, and in the very air of new-born strength shown in the poise of the figure, whose feet just touched the shore, there was a suggestion of past trouble and difficulty; something that spoke of a dark, long night that had preceded the glad day, of a faint or indifferent heart surprised and touched by an unexpected and undeserved welcome to the shores of light.

Wynyard came to look over Alma's shoulder before she had finished with the picture, and pointed out the beauty and completeness of the work. He told her that Mrs. Anstice had several other drawings of the same

kind, all done by Miss Moore's sister, now too great an invalid to leave her room, and when Mrs. Anstice held out her hand as if impatient to restore the treasure to its place, he asked permission to show the other pictures to Miss Rivers. When leave was granted, Katherine brought a portfolio and stood opposite Alma and Wynyard, showing the drawings, but guarding them, so Alma fancied, a little jealously against too close an inspection, and never allowing them to pass out of her own hands. They were all of the same mystical character, but varied in detail. Here the whole picture seemed to grow and expand out of a small decaying seed; stalks, leaves, and flowers which, unclosing, disclosed angel faces and branched upwards towards infinite light. Here a crowd of seraph faces bent over a rose, from one of whose leaves depended an empty chrysalis, and on whose heart two caterpillars were feeding. Here again was the shore of light with the wide sea, but in this, there was no figure visible on the further verge; a golden mist brooded over it, and on the near bank were two persons bending down to loosen the fastenings that held a boat to the strand. In another, a woman, with a face full of yearning and hope, held a casket in her arms, outstretched towards heaven. A message or a parable was contained in each picture. Alma, who was less occupied than Wynyard with the beauty of the drawings, stole, every now and then, a questioning look at Katherine Moore, to see if there was anything in her countenance or manner when she answered Wynyard's questions as to the meaning of the designs, that would throw light on the mystery of their composition, or on the reason of their being sent to Mrs. Anstice. What interest had these sisters in her, to induce them to give so much time and thought to her consolation?

"Katherine tells me the drawings are given to her sister for me," Mrs. Anstice was now remarking to Wynyard; "and though I am always glad of a new one, I think the old ones get dearer to me every day, and that a fresh hope steals into my heart each time I look at them—hopes that I should not dare to listen to, if they were put into words. These pictures are better than words, they never startle and they never hurry me,

but they creep into my heart and comfort me, I don't know how. You will tell your sister this, won't you?" she added, looking at Katherine. "I don't know why she takes so much trouble for me, or how she knows exactly what I want; but I can't think what I should do without her and you, especially now that Wynyard is going away, and I shall have no one else near me, I care to see."

Alma looked at Katherine while Mrs. Anstice spoke. Yes, indeed, what was the link between them, how came the sisters to understand her grief better than anyone else?

Katherine, happening to turn round suddenly, met the questioning gaze with another as full of meaning, a long steadfast look, which had more in it than a steady putting down of Alma's curiosity. There was that in the look, but there was something else too, and all through the rest of the evening, when she and Wynyard had rejoined Lady Rivers in the drawing-room, Alma questioned with herself what that something was.

Could Katherine Moore feel compassion for *her*, Alma Rivers, on the day when she had seen for the first time the stately house she was soon to enter as its mistress? If it was not pity that softened those clear, judging eyes while they dwelt on her face, what was the meaning of their changed expression? The look haunted Alma like a prophecy, or a warning of coming disappointment.

It was late when Katherine got back to the watch-maker's shop at Barnsby, where she and Christabel had lived for three months. Christabel was still waiting up for her in their little room, and though she looked white and exhausted, Katherine humoured her by sitting at her side and allowing herself to be minutely cross-questioned on every particular of the visit to Leigh.

It was now two months since Christabel herself had been at Leigh, and Katherine knew she was not likely to be able to go there again, while Mrs. Anstice lived. The intercourse, accidentally begun, on which Christabel set such store could only be kept up by means of the little pictures which Katherine had, after much en-

treaty, consented to convey to Leigh from time to time.

"So they came in and you saw them together; were you satisfied?" Christabel asked, after a longer interval of silence than had occurred yet.

Katherine took some time to consider her answer.

"I think she loves him for himself, and that she is perhaps strong enough to bear a great downfall of her ambition bravely, if it comes; but she is ambitious and worldly, and as to being satisfied—I cannot be that while you are silent; you know what I would have had you do long since."

"Dearest, we will not discuss that matter; you said you would not ask me again. I promised him that he should tell his mother himself, and you know that their meeting will be soon: it can only be delayed a few weeks longer you think, and there will still be time for him to win her forgiveness, and reconcile her to me, as he always said he would, before I come. I was not to see her while she was angry with him, or me, and I shall not."

"For my sake, Christabel, do not talk so. You have no right to take *that* for granted. It may be natural under all the circumstances, but it is not right; and remember, as your nurse, as well as your sister, I forbid you to talk of it."

"I can obey that order," said Christabel, smiling and stroking Katherine's face. "I won't talk, dear, after to-night. I know it is cruel to you. I have been very cruel to you this last year of my life. I see it clearly now, and that is one of my punishments. I have just taken your life—the grand, beautiful life you had planned to make yours—and I have crushed it out with my own, in snatching at a happiness to which I had no right, which I ought at all events to have waited patiently for. I have been cruel, like all selfish people, and I can only ask you now, as I do in my heart every moment of the day, to forgive me."

"Nay, you are only cruel when you talk of leaving me."

"I must, whenever you raise that question. It is only when you know what I really look forward to, that

you can help blaming me. I want you to let me keep my promise to him till I see him again, since it will be so soon, and the silence for that time can only hurt our two selves."

"If I could be sure of that! But how do you know that you are not depriving Mrs. Anstice of a great comfort by not letting her know what has been, and what may be?"

"Katherine, you don't really think that? I had only to talk to her for a few minutes, and look in her face, to understand his fear of telling her. It would have been hard for her to hear it, if all had been well; but now—to learn from strangers that he died with such a secret between him and herself, would kindle in her a fire of jealousy that even the chills of death could hardly quench. No, as he always said, he must tell her himself. She has a stern nature, and the life she led with him was full of storms. Yet there was strong love on both sides, and when they meet, perhaps they will be permitted only to remember the love."

"But why do you send her those pictures, if you do not want her to know anything?"

"I am planting a little seed that will bloom out there. She will go with a hidden hope in her heart, and when she looks at it with purged eyes, she will understand, and will be ready for me and for it, if I take it with me."

"Again, dear, you must not say such things."

"I don't want to leave you desolate, Kitty; I have my hope for you too, and this once I will speak of it. I should like something to be paid back into your life, to make up, I don't say for the miss of me, but for the sacrifices these last months have cost you. We are not so poor now, that a new charge would be a burden to you. Uncle Christopher's legacy has saved us from anxieties of that nature for the future, and I should like you to have some one to train up in your own views, who would repay you better than I have done. If my child is a girl, all will be comparatively easy. No one need ever know the whole history but Lord Anstice; he will make it all right for her, and you can take her away to Zürich and live with your friends there, and make her what you

would have been but for me. I know it won't annul the hardship to you, darling. I have broken your heart nearly, and spoilt your life, but at least I see where I was wrong, and have repented and been forgiven. These are precious months of waiting and learning we are having together, and, dearest, I think your life will be the richer and stronger for them. You will carry out some of our old dreams still, with a new spirit put into the old aspirations; and you will think sometimes, won't you, when you are working for others, that you have a double life's work laid upon you—mine, that I threw away, as well as your own."

Katherine was stroking Christabel's thin hand as she talked, and instead of answering, she held the almost transparent fingers to the light. "They are very thin," she said, sadly; "too thin—and yet they look as if they had a good deal of work left in them yet. They never did such beautiful things before, as they do now, and I can't believe that this wonderful new power has come to them, to cease in a few months. No, dear; you, too, have a life of activity for others, before you."

"Here or there?" said Christabel softly.

"You must not wish."

"I don't wish. On the contrary, when I am dreaming, a great sorrow and a great yearning come over me. I feel the half-developed power in me, and I see visions of beautiful art-work that would have been given to me to do, if I had been faithful to my calling, and not snatched at a personal happiness I could not reach, without treading down other people's good. Then I find it hard to hush my spirit and refrain from longing for the opportunities given back. I don't turn away from life if it is given, I only acknowledge the monition I have within myself, that I have forfeited it, and that I shall not have the chance now, of doing here what I was meant to do."

"Of course I know there is no use arguing against presentiments, but I must be true to my knowledge and remind you that they are not uncommon in your circumstances, or much to be regarded. There is an alternative which I think you don't look at enough, and which I must bring forward once more, to urge you to speak or to

let me speak, to Lord Anstice before it is quite too late. I heard this afternoon that an early day next month is fixed for Lord Anstice's wedding. Suppose some morning, three months hence, he suddenly hears that an heir is born to his cousin, in whose favour title and estates will have to be given up, what a mockery the grand wedding for which the Riverses are preparing, will then seem to every one!"

"Nay, surely not. What will it signify to two people, happy in each other, whether they had a grand or a simple wedding? Did not Lord Anstice tell you that he and Miss Rivers were engaged on their journey home from La Roquette before they knew anything about his change of fortune? They meant to have each other all the time, it seems, and this flash of prosperity, if it should turn out to be only temporary, will seem to them to have come in good time to bring them together without opposition."

"You hardly estimate what the disappointment must be to people who know more of the world than you do, dearest."

"Ah, but I do. It is you who underestimate what a help it will be to them, under the disappointment, to have had that chief matter of their lives put beyond question, before the reverse came. It would be all that less to think of; and if she is worth anything at all, she would hardly have a thought to spare from thankfulness that she had the right to comfort him."

"I wish I had not felt such a strong impulse to warn Miss Rivers this evening when I saw her. I observed her from the window in Mrs. Anstice's room when she came out after dinner with Lord Anstice, and afterwards while she was turning over the leaves in your portfolio, I took a long look at her face, and the result was that I had a longing to warn them both."

"I wish I could recall her face quite clearly," Christabel said. "I have been trying all day to bring it back to my memory. Emmie West once showed me her photograph, and occasionally I had a peep in Saville Street. Surely we used to like her face, there was something fine about it."

"Yes, and something weak as well. The weakness

that is fostered by living among people who have few enthusiasms ; the weakness of lacking the single eye—a want that leaves the whole body full of darkness, when a choice between outward and inward good has to be made. I think the weakness has grown, too, and that there is a shadow on the face which used not to be there.”

“ But she loves him ; it is a true mutual love.”

“ Since the engagement preceded this change of fortune, I suppose we ought not to doubt that. I told you that I had had the courage to put a leading question to Lord Anstice, and that he seemed glad to let me know how it had been. He is not changed by his changed fortunes ; he was just as anxious to bespeak our good opinion and friendship for his wife, as if he had been going to take her to those rooms over the printing-office he once described to us, instead of to Leigh. I don’t know anyone who stands outside his circumstances as he does.”

“ Then he is ready for whatever happens. And as for Alma Rivers, if her spirit is clouded, what can we wish for her better than trouble, to bring her to her better self ? I do recollect her face now, and I am sure there is good enough in it to give us ground for believing that she will rise to meet the disappointment bravely if it comes ; and, remember, there are at least two alternatives against its coming.”

“ Well, dearest, my concern is chiefly with you, and I know we cannot afford to waste your strength in avoidable agitation. I have made my last remonstrance, and shall now keep to our bargain, that if you will obey me inside this house, I will leave your relations with the outside world alone for the present. Now I am going to put you to bed, and read you to sleep with a bundle of letters from Saville Street that came this morning.”

“ Do the Wests write from Saville Street still ? ”

“ Yes, but it was their last day. The furniture from ‘ Air Throne ’ had been sent to their cottage in Kent, and Mildie writes to us from the empty room, perched on the window-sill, with her writing-desk on her knees—a melancholy tirade, as you shall hear.”

“ Poor Dr. Urquhart ! That was a mistaken prophecy of yours, Katherine. You gave Emmie’s heart away

very easily when we talked about it at first. I remember you expected to see it flower into love under Dr. Urquhart's courting as surely as the hyacinth roots into bloom, when you had put them in the sun."

"My hyacinths never produced anything but leaves, if you remember, last spring, so my comparison held good, if my prophecy did not. Poor little Emmie!"

"What an inconsistent sigh from you, Dr. Katherine Moore that is to be!"

"Not at all! I have my suspicions about Emmie's reasons for refusing Dr. Urquhart; and even if they were nothing else, I am sure I am right to sigh at the prospect of another incompetent teacher being thrust upon the world, to wear herself away with uncongenial work. I wish we could do anything beyond sending that fifty pounds as additional rent for our two years' tenancy of 'Air Throne,' which Mrs. West will not, I think, refuse, now she knows we can so well spare it."

"It is my fault that we must shut ourselves away from all our friends till the end of the year, in this out-of-the-way place, where nobody knows us. But never mind, dear Katherine, good sense and gentleness count for something, and Emmie won't do any harm to her pupils for a few months, even without a certificate. After that time your hands will be free, and you can do what you like for her; have her to live with you, and fit her for congenial work of some sort, since she seems to have a heart of the inconvenient kind that refuses to give itself away, as self-interest dictates."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ΑΤΕ.

Zeû, Zeû, κάτωθεν ἀμπέμων ὑστερόποιον ἄταν.

THE summer had been a very hot one, but September had set in damp and gusty, and the sudden change of temperature brought an increase in Mrs. Anstice's ailments, which cast a degree of gloom over the latter part of the Rivers's visit to Leigh. Lady Rivers naturally

resented any hint of alarm respecting the symptoms of an illness resembling her own, and was alternately disposed to fret over the prospect of Alma's being saddled with a permanent invalid in her married home, and to grow agitated under a sudden dread that something immediate might happen to postpone the wedding. To be sure it would only entail a delay of a few weeks, for what was this poor Mrs. Anstice to any of them; but even a short delay would cause grave inconvenience, and would give the Kirkmans a handle to talk. It made Lady Rivers's hair stand on end, even to think of the triumph that would fill Mrs. Kirkman's heart, if the smallest excuse were given her for saying that the fine fish for which Miss Rivers had angled so shamelessly, had escaped from her net just as it was landed. "And you know, Alma, she is quite capable of saying that, or something still more vulgar, if she could think of it, and she is cleverer than I am, your father says; but then he thinks anybody cleverer than I am." Sir Francis Rivers came to Leigh for the last week of the visit, and his presence diverted from Alma the hearing of some of her mother's complaints and forebodings. On the other hand he brought fresh elements of discomfort into the atmosphere—allusions to his sons' idleness, to the needs of the West boys, and fresh schemes for pushing their fortunes through Mr. Kirkman, which made Alma wince and blush. Nearly as bad were his floods of professional talk, into which Wynyard was guilty of plunging, with a relish that suggested the amount of *ennui* inflicted on him, by Lady Rivers's previous efforts to keep the conversation during meals at the level she considered due to the coronet on the plate and the footmen's liveries. "Encouraging your father in his very worst faults," Lady Rivers moaned, when she and her daughter were alone, "even to the enormity of bringing dusty law-books into the drawing-room and looking out quotations with your father for his dreadful book, under my very eyes, while the butler was handing round the tea. The sort of thing I have been fighting against all my life. When I first thought of having an earl for my son-in-law, I little expected he'd take that side, and weaken my hands with your father to this extent. There might

have been a want of refinement at Golden Mount; but it would not have been of a kind so fatal to all domestic discipline, the men-servants' feelings were respected there, at least. I wonder you can bear it, Alma!"

Yet in spite of these and some other drawbacks, there were portions of that week to which Alma always looked back with tender yearning; golden half-hours, during which the peace, and joy, and sunshine of love entered her heart with half promises of always staying there. Evening and morning and mid-day strolls with Wynyard on the terrace; slow rides in quiet lanes between the autumnal hedge rows; exhilarating canter across the stubble of the lately cleared harvest-fields; times when the present was full enough to crowd out all remembrance of the past, and fears for the future; when, by the help of some country sight or sound, she found herself lifted over recent memories and landed in recollections of earlier days which, without any remorse, she could share with Wynyard. True, a very little thing, a chance word, a sudden question, a name cropping up in the conversation might put an end to all this satisfaction in a minute, and suddenly reopen to Alma's perception the dividing gulf between herself and her lover.

When Alma was next alone after such a happy hour with such an abrupt awakening, she usually comforted herself by making resolutions of perfect frankness towards her husband at some future time. Some day, in this very place (and before the visit was over, Alma had in thought made half-a-dozen lovely spots out of doors and cosy nooks in the house, the scene of the confidence)—some day—when use had given an added sweetness to all the details of life, when they were returning from a walk on some spring evening next year, or after a conversation, perhaps, over an old favourite book by their winter fire-side, when some unusual emotion of tenderness had been called out—she would take courage and tell him the whole story. She would begin, "You know me now, and you know how I love you, you cannot doubt the love of your own wife,—well, now I will tell you the truth about myself, how I felt and what I did a year ago; and because you are my husband, and better and stronger than I am, you must help me to bear the flaws in my

conscience that make me feel unworthy of you. I am not unworldly as you are, it was not altogether disinterested love that made me marry you. I do care very much to see you here, and perhaps even love you better in a position that I think becomes you, than I could ever have done if you had remained in obscurity. It is not high-minded to feel like this; but it belongs to me, and as we are one now, you have got to bear with it." Then she thought she would begin and tell him straight out the history of Madelon's wedding-day, and how she had hidden the letter in the drawer of cut corks in the little south room at La Roquette. It would be a great blow to him. She pictured to herself the changes on his face while he listened. At first he would hardly believe she had done it; would put a question or two eagerly, half hoping to find some excuse, some explanation that she had forgotten to give; but when it was all over, he would not turn away from her, he would take it as a misfortune that concerned them both. He would comfort her, and perhaps even admire her for the courage that had led her to reveal the truth at last.

Alma imagined that after such confession her conscience would be healed, and she would feel at liberty to take his love as really belonging to her in a way she could not do now. This was the plan she made in her happiest moments, but she could not always see it possible, even when she and Wynyard most nearly resumed the old footing of dear and unclouded intimacy. There were occasions when a word or look of his would awaken quite an opposite mood, and she found herself near to registering a vow never to let him have the least hint of a deed, that would sink her to a depth of contempt she had not imagined to be in him. Sometimes a terror seized her, whether it was that *one* deception only, which had erected the barrier she found it so hard to pass. Had she been sinking lower, growing smaller, more sordid in her views and aims, while he had been rising higher? Had his life, as Agatha's had, grown so far apart from hers, that "they could not hear each other speak," in however close companionship their days and years were passed?

The hopeful mood was uppermost in Alma's mind on

the morning of her departure from Leigh. She and Wynyard had had an early ride, when the fresh touch of autumn in the air, and the dewy beauty of the woods and fields had exhilarated them to a pitch of almost boyish and girlish joyousness. After breakfast, while Wynyard took leave of Mrs. Anstice, she and her father made a final tour of the gardens together, and Alma thoroughly enjoyed his sensible appreciation of the beauty and grandeur she displayed to him, with a sense of proprietorship stealing into her heart. There was nothing in her father's way of speaking to offend her taste. His was the kind of satisfaction that her judgment approved as a fitting homage to the good things of the world. She felt almost restored to self-complacency as she listened, and a word or two dropped by Sir Francis about Wynyard's worth and his probable weight in the country in the coming years, made her heart beat quickly, and her cheeks glow, while she whispered to herself that at last she was happy,—as happy as she had ever expected to be. Wynyard met them on the terrace, and Sir Francis left the lovers alone to take a last look at the sunny gardens, and exchange happy auguries for the future.

"It will not be precisely this picture that we shall see when we come back," said Alma, as they turned away from the sparkling fountains and the blaze of autumn flowers, and began to walk towards the house. "The richness and the glory will have mellowed, and the year entered upon another stage before we stand here together again."

"That may be sooner than we have been expecting, dear," answered Wynyard, "for I have just promised Mrs. Anstice that nothing shall prevent my seeing her once more. I could not refuse her the comfort of such an assurance, could I, Alma? And you will not grudge the sacrifice, if we have to make it, of shortening the time of our absence, for her sake. I have said that we will hold ourselves in readiness. Katherine Moore has undertaken to write if any change for the worse should take place whilst we are away."

This was the one jarring note to Alma in the perfect harmony of that happy morning.

She had consented reluctantly that Wynyard should consider himself bound to Mrs. Anstice's service for the few months longer she was likely to live; but it vexed her to be reminded, just in this hour, that he had a duty unconnected with herself, to which their plans must give way. The vexation she felt upon this account recalled another disturbing thought to her mind.

"Katherine Moore," she repeated, thoughtfully, "you seem to take it for granted that she will go on coming about the place. Has Mrs. Anstice engaged her as companion or nurse? Is there any reason of that kind for all the trouble Miss Moore takes for Mrs. Anstice?"

"I should think not; Miss Moore has had some money left her lately by an uncle who died in Australia. So, at least, she told me when I ventured to remonstrate on her allowing Mrs. Anstice to take up so much of her time."

"I wonder she does. It must be very melancholy work. I wonder she spends so much time with Mrs. Anstice, who is no relation to her, if she is not obliged."

"Do you?" Wynyard answered.

They had reached the carriage by this time, and the conversation dropped.

Alma did not notice how silent Wynyard was during the first hour of the journey, or suspect in the least that she had spoiled his happy recollections of that sunny morning as effectually as he had spoiled hers. Lady Rivers made conversation enough, however, to cover other people's deficiencies. A thousand little details of the wedding-day had to be discussed, and now was the time, she observed, to talk them over. Wynyard, on plea of the recent death in his family, and Mrs. Anstice's precarious state of health, had begged hard for a quiet wedding. It was to be very quiet, Lady Rivers explained to him now, only not quite a hole-and-corner wedding.

"It will never do, you know," she urged, "to give people the opportunity of saying that we were ashamed of ourselves, and had the wedding in a corner on that account."

Here, once more, for the very last time, she hoped, Alma had to give her mother a warning look, to prevent

her letting drop a further explanatory word respecting the reason for which the Kirkmans might suppose them to be ashamed; for the thought of her old friend Mrs. Kirkman's wrath was too constantly present to Lady Rivers's mind, not to ooze out, more or less, in her talk when she got excited.

Dread of Mrs. Kirkman's anger was by no means Alma's worst skeleton, but the dimensions it assumed in her mother's imagination had a certain effect on hers, and at the end of the day, when they were nearing London, she felt a foreboding creep over her, with the familiar thick atmosphere. She half expected Horace Kirkman's face to appear at the carriage-window when the train stopped, or to catch a glimpse of the gorgeous Kirkman livery among the carriages that were waiting outside the station. The long train was crowded with less pretentious persons, however, chiefly family parties returning from seaside trips, and some delay occurred in getting the luggage together, and finding the carriage.

Sir Francis went outside to look for it, and while Wynyard searched about for a resting-place for Lady Rivers, Alma stood alone and watched the crowd. Did those women, who were struggling for their boxes in the throng by the barrier, or frantically hailing cabs, and collecting trains of children, think her an enviable specimen of womankind, she wondered, for being able to stand quietly aside and let things take their course? Could she imagine herself acting such a bustling part in life? Yet were there not, a long way back in her memory, pictures of some such comings home from holiday excursions, when the boys were still quite small and the army of nursemaids by no means equal to the occasion? Was there not some story about Frank having been lost on a return journey from the seaside, left behind at a London terminus, and brought home by a gentleman who had been greatly taken with his handsome face and intelligent way of accounting for himself? It was a story her father had once, in the days when Frank was still a favourite, been fond of telling, till Lady Rivers began to think it reflected on their grandeur, and put her veto upon its ever being mentioned again.

Alma wondered afterwards what made her think of Frank just then, why a vision of him,—a slender bright-faced school-boy, as he looked at the time when papa could still flatter himself about his good disposition, and be eager about his removes and prizes,—should be the last that occupied her mind before she caught sight of her father coming back on the station platform. One glance at his face chased all thought away, and her heart stood still with fright, so clearly was disaster written upon it. She hurried towards him, for he scarcely seemed able to stand, and his first movement was to grasp her by the shoulder, and lean heavily upon her. His face was white and drawn, and his body bowed, as if under the effect of a deadly blow.

“Oh, papa! what is it?” she cried, when a second or two had passed, while his twitching lips could not form a word. “Tell me, that I may tell mamma.”

Then he rallied and stood upright.

“Yes, yes, your mother—I cannot see her at this moment, you must get her home first. I will follow and tell her when she is a little prepared; but get her home now.”

“What is it?”

“A telegram from India, put into my hands this moment.”

“Is it Melville or Frank?” Alma whispered.

The answer was a deep groan, and a quick shake of the head. Then in a far-off tone, which somehow seemed to come from over the sea, instead of through her father’s pale lips, she heard:

“He is dead! my boy, my poor boy!”

No need again to ask which. Frank, poor Frank, of whom her father had once been so proud, who had disappointed him most cruelly, and always been loved the best, by both father and mother.

“You must take your mother home,” Sir Francis repeated; “there’s the telegram, but don’t show it until you have her safe in the house. I could not drive with you; no, my dear, I could not sit it out. Forgive me for throwing the burden on you, but I will walk with Wynyard, and be at home almost as soon as you are. Ah! Wynyard was the best friend he ever had, and he

wanted me not to send him to India. If I had put him into some humbler way of life—if your mother had not urged me so hard—and now, how am I to tell her the miserable end he has brought upon himself!”

The drive home with Lady Rivers, a little anxious, but still more offended at her husband's sudden desertion, was got through somehow, as the worst moments of life are lived through, we never afterwards quite know how.

Alma knelt by her mother's chair in the drawing-room, already a little put out of its usual appearance, by incipient preparations for the wedding, and tried, through leading remarks and questions, to prepare her for the shock that must be given sooner or later. It seemed a long, long time, before her father's knock came, and yet she had not got the news told when she heard it. Her mother's thoughts would turn to such thoroughly opposite calamities from the one that awaited her—fears that Alma's sick heart loathed to speak about, and yet which she was obliged to discuss and dismiss—that something had occurred between Constance and her husband, a quarrel, a separation—a scandal about young Lawrence; that the late Lord Anstice had suddenly come to life, and reduced Wynyard to a nobody again; that the Kirkmans had said or done something to prevent the wedding. Sir Francis's face as he entered the room did more than anything else to bring the right thought to poor Lady Rivers's mind, the right word to her lips.

“Frank!” Yes, nothing but that would make Sir Francis look so. The name of the firstborn, beloved, and yet a little dreaded (had it not been uttered in blame chiefly, during the last year or two), burst simultaneously from the lips of the bereaved parents as they faced one another. After a few minutes Alma thought it best to steal away, leaving the two who had loved each other dearly once, though worldliness and prosperity had thrust their hearts asunder, to draw together, in the shadow of the first death that had invaded their family.

But terrible as was that night of new sorrow, sad as were the following days, when one short inscrutable sentence summed up the whole cause of their grief, there was worse to come. “Killed in a duel,” on such a date, the telegram stated, and the intelligence seemed bad.

enough, as if nothing could make it worse. Yet there was worse to be heard, and it fell the more heavily on Sir Francis, because, during the fortnight that elapsed between getting the telegram and the arrival of letters, the gentle process of beautifying the dead had had time to go far enough, to make a rude facing of hard facts additionally bitter. To have restored one's dead to a pedestal in the heart, and dressed him up in lost graces and innocences of youth, and then to have a tale of his dishonour thrust upon one, of base intrigue, ending in what might well be called a deserved punishment at the hand of the friend he had betrayed—what could be more heart-rending? A good deal was kept from Alma and Lady Rivers as unfit for their ears; but they could not escape gathering a general impression of disgrace and misery from the extreme depression into which Sir Francis fell, after additional news came. It was vacation time, and there was no work going on in the courts, or he would probably have roused himself to attend to it, and borne the blow better. To see him so absorbed by grief as to lose interest in all his usual objects, was something quite new to his family, who did not know how to meet such a crisis. It was well for them all that Wynyard was at hand, willing to let himself be made the recipient of the miserable father's complaints, and with a liking for his friend of early days which made him a sympathising listener. Alma left the task of comforting her father mainly to him, and did not take advantage of times when they might have been together to let him comfort her, as he longed to be able to do. She was somewhat perversely wretched at this juncture, and nursed a sense of loneliness to which the present state of the household tempted her. With her father and mother the great calamity swallowed up all thought of her personal disappointment, and she found herself wondering sometimes whether the postponement of their wedding was anything like as great a vexation to Wynyard as it was to herself. He could talk easily of a few weeks' delay, but to her, a feverish restlessness came with the uncertainty. She was too proud to show that she suffered more than he, when the day that was to have been their crowning day passed by unnoticed; the hours that should have been so joyous

slipping by in gloomy solitude. Her mother never talked about the wedding now, and seldom of the Kirkmans. There was no longer any need to fear indiscretion from her. Wynyard had almost ceased to be a future son-in-law, or even an earl, in her estimation. He was just Frank's friend, the one person who had ever done any good with poor Frank, and she would monopolise him, when he was not with Sir Francis, in a way that was very trying to Alma, so completely did it seem to put her and her claims aside as non-existent.

Alma did not show to advantage in her mother's sick-room, and she felt that she did not. It was not altogether her fault, for Lady Rivers had never made her a companion for anything but society purposes; the idea of taking this brilliant daughter into real service as a nurse, or comforter, would have been almost as unnatural to her, as the thought of putting on her court pearls, to go to bed in. Even a common sorrow could not draw them together at once, or annul in Alma's heart the antagonism which dated from early years, when the falseness and pretension of which Lady Rivers's life was so largely made up, first dawned upon her, and which had coloured her whole manner of being towards her mother.

It did not help her that Lady Rivers was always longing after Emmie West, and would entertain Wynyard with histories of Emmie's pleasantness, and sweetness of temper, and agreeable methods of making the hours pass at La Roquette. It seemed, Alma thought, almost a mania with her mother to talk about La Roquette to Wynyard whenever she ceased to speak of Frank, and she found herself taking a miserable sickly interest, and criticising the few remarks that he made in reply to these praises. They never quite satisfied her. She always thought he said a word too much, or a word too little, when he had to speak about Emmie's perfections, and daily the sense of loneliness grew, hardening like a crust over her heart, and stiffening her manner till she hardly knew herself.

The days crept on, and October arrived, before the elders of the family could be roused to make any plans, or consent to a change of abode; but at length the re-

appearance of some symptoms in Lady Rivers of the illness from which she had suffered last winter, gave the necessary impetus to decision.

It was rather hastily determined that Sir Francis should take his family to San Remo, while there was still time for him to settle them there, before his duties called him back to London. Wynyard was to join Lady Rivers and Alma a little later on; and there would be no reason why the deferred wedding should not take place at San Remo about the end of the year, when Sir Francis would again be able to come out to them.

Wynyard urged this, trying to put things in the very best light, when the last days before his parting with Alma came, and he insisted on having more of her company than she had afforded him hitherto. She listened to his plans, and tried to be hopeful—tried hard to soften out of the cold anger against herself and her circumstances, that held her like a possession. Sometimes she succeeded, telling herself that all might yet be well in a few weeks; and sometimes, while Wynyard talked of the pleasant southern air, and the sunshine that would gladden their next meeting, a deadlier heart-sickness than she had yet known assailed her; a vivid recollection of the sights, and sounds, and scents of Madelon's wedding-morning rose with Wynyard's words, and she whispered to herself that by no possibility could a day in that likeness bring her happiness. Oh, no! she had poisoned all such days for herself for ever, and could not, try as she would, see herself a triumphant bride, in circumstances that would bring her fault so livingly before her.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

LONGHURST.

And now my heart caught new sensations of pleasure the nearer I approached that peaceful mansion. As a bird that has been frightened from its nest, my affection outwent my haste, and hovered round my little fireside with all the rapture of expectation.

Ueberall ist eine Freudenblume
In den Kranz des Lebens eingereiht.

"A BREAK and pair, how jolly, sent to meet us! You don't mean it, Mildie."

"Of course I don't, you boys are to walk; hush Casa! Lord Anstice has come by this train, and the waggonette is sent for him; but the housekeeper at Longhurst, who is very considerate to mother, settled for Emmie and me to ride in it too, to save a cab, and there's a cart waiting for everybody's luggage."

"The housekeeper at Longhurst considerate to mother! That's the way you've learned to talk since you came here, is it?" snorted Casabianca. "You poor toady of a girl thing. I tell you, there's room enough in that break for us all five, and for Lord Anstice, as you call him, as well. I'll not be balked of a ride in a break when I've a chance of getting it, I promise you, for any fool of the sort. There he is, getting out of a first-class carriage, looking, I declare, as mooney as ever he did before he was a lord, not smartened up one bit. Why on earth should we not all ride in a break with him? I shall just go up and ask him that."

Emmie had moved a little further down the platform, with Sidney and the Gentle Lamb hanging about her, to count her brother's boxes and her own as they came out of the van, and Mildie's remonstrance only sent Casa the more boldly forward on his enterprise.

"Oh, I say, don't you know me?" he exclaimed, coming up to Wynyard, who was rather absently looking round the once familiar Hurst station, which brought sundry half-sad, half-pleasant recollections of schoolboy and college days vividly back to him.

"He was as pleased as possible to be spoken to—he looked right down glad to see me," Casabianca averred to Mildie afterwards, and he was not far wrong.

Wynyard's thoughts during a solitary journey had not been altogether pleasant ones, and he was glad on the whole of something to give them a new turn. As he walked down the platform with Casa, he heard full details of the circumstances that had brought so many of the family to Hurst station that day.

"Of course you did not see us before, we travelled third-class, always do," said Casabianca, magnanimous, if defiant. "Oh no, it did not hurt Emmie in the least, it's of no consequence to her; *she's* in no danger of meeting fellows who might chaff her about it afterwards. How

does she come to be travelling down with us, do you say? She's come to spend Christmas with mamma; came straight to London from the Hudson Kirkmans yesterday—the ironmongering Kirkmans up in the north, where she's governess now, you know, worse luck. However, I don't suppose they've a grain of chaff among them all; the boys there are all little cubs under eight, and they seem to make no end of a fuss with Emmie. Here we are, look out, Emmie!”—and then Emmie turned round from counting her boxes, and she and Wynyard met for the first time since they parted under the magnolia-trees at La Roquette, in the spring.

There was no recollection of that evening in Emmie's frank, clear eyes as they rested on Wynyard's face while inquiries and greetings were exchanged—no little flutter of manner, no blush or shyness to make the moment embarrassing. Wynyard was the most conscious of the two, afraid of satisfying the inclination he felt to look a second time in the quiet, soft eyes that had once said so much to him; he was the most disposed to make sudden breaks in the conversation and turn away to inspect the luggage.

Of course Casabianca had his way, and the whole party packed themselves into the waggonette for the five miles' drive to Longhurst. The boys soon threw off any awe of Lord Anstice they had felt; and were in wild spirits as they were bowled along the country roads between the hedgerows, shouting to scare the rooks from the ploughed fields, and taking off their caps to the fieldfares and sparrows set in motion by their noise, with such ecstatic delight, as might be expected from a trio of town school-boys, on their first experience of a country drive at Christmas time. Emmie and Wynyard sat in opposite corners of the waggonette, and both took a very fair share in the mirth, while each carried on a train of separate thought and of observation of the other. Emmie was just a little disappointed in what she read in Wynyard's face when, now and then, he left off chaffing Casabianca on the astounding acquaintance with country life his remarks displayed, and fell into silence for a minute or two. She had expected to see such perfect satisfaction there. She had been in the habit of comfort-

ing herself whenever she felt a little lonely or down-hearted during the long months from home, by reflecting how well all was with him, how perfectly all his dreams had been realised, the summit of his wishes attained, that he, at all events, must be happy. Perhaps she had not exactly wished to witness the happiness with her own eyes, not being sure that for her there might not be a touch of pain in comparing his perfect joy with "the low beginnings of content" to which she had attained. Still she had been able to find comfort in the thought of his complete satisfaction; and now she was disappointed as a second and a third glance failed to show her what she had been expecting to see. While he was laughing and talking he was sufficiently like his old self, but directly his face grew grave, she felt the want of something that surely ought to have been there. Was it some mere temporary vexation, or could it possibly be an abiding discontent that laid such a weight upon his brow, and so altered the expression of his lips? As she was trying to satisfy herself on this point, Wynyard's eye woke up and met hers, and she felt a little confusion at having been caught in such earnest contemplation of him. She turned hastily away towards Sidney, and busied herself for several minutes in rubbing his cold hands till they were warm again; but the confusion was not ungraceful or overwhelming, it did not prevent Wynyard from continuing to look at her, and in his turn, studying her averted face, to make out the meaning of the change that had passed upon it, since their sudden parting in the spring. The blooming fresh May rose,—had it lain in the dust till its delicate petals had lost their freshness and tender grace, or had it sheltered itself from injury by closing up into the bud stage again? Was this precisely the shy, shrinking Emmie West of old Saville Street days now before him, or a quite new development of the character? He perceived some signs that might have led to the first conclusion. There were certainly a good many reminiscences of Saville Street to be traced in Emmie's dress, which had quite lost the temporarily borrowed daintiness that had distinguished its *La Roquette* state; the clinging dusty *crêpe* trimmings of her dress, rumpled with the two days' journey, the worn gloves,

the severely plain black bonnet that framed the fair face, —all at first sight brought suggestions of the earliest stage of their acquaintance ; but a second glance removed the impression, and made these rather foils to heighten the change in her beauty that grew on his notice the longer he looked. The surroundings were the same, but they were worn with a difference. Emmie had grown above her clothes, and, let them be as shabby as they would, her loveliness could no longer be quenched by them in any degree ; it had blossomed out into a sweetness and dignity that lifted it as much above danger of eclipse from mere equipments, as a dazzling white lily is safe from gathering blackness from the earth it hangs above. Not that there had been any change in form, or feature, or colouring, it was the new expression in the face that gave it its new power and charm. The look of victory on the brow, the peace that dwelt on the lips whether closed or parted in smiles, the freedom from self and self-regardful thoughts, which every light and shade upon the clear countenance told of ; it was this ennobling of the whole being which raised Emmie's beauty so far above the malice of her clothes, that in estimating the changes in her, it was impossible to give more than a passing thought to them, impossible any longer to pity her for the struggles or privations they told of. Pity ! if Wynyard had been thinking of Mrs. Kirkman's young governess with any feeling of the kind, he was ashamed of it now, and felt contemptuously angry with himself for some compunctious thoughts he had been troubled with, on her account. It was evident that by some road or other, Emmie had climbed to a standpoint where it would be presumptuous in him to think of pitying her. Whether the long-drawn breath with which Wynyard dismissed a past anxiety, brought as much relief to his mind as it ought to have done cannot be determined.

Emmie came to an end of her cares for Sidney after a while, and raising her head, her eyes fairly met Wynyard's again, this time with a question in them : "What are you thinking of while you watch me so closely?" At the same moment her lips parted into a smile, proud and a little defiant, as she broke the silence

with the first direct question she had addressed to him. "You will begin your journey to San Remo in a day or two, will you not? I had a letter from Aunt Rivers last week, in which she told me all their news. It is to be on the first day of the new year, is it not?"

"A good day for two people to turn their backs on old things, and start on a fresh life, don't you think?" said Wynyard.

While Emmie was wondering whether his tone of voice expressed quite as much satisfaction in the prospect as might have been expected, Mildie, full of recollections of that tear-stained leaf in Dr. Urquhart's dictionary which contained the history of the edible green frog, struck in with a string of questions that occupied Wynyard's attention, till the waggonette drew up before the door of Mrs. West's cottage. This well-timed curiosity drew out an explanation of Lord Anstice's sudden visit to Longhurst and circumstances connected with it, that were unknown to Emmie. Since the sudden news of Frank's death, Sir Francis and Lady Rivers had felt a great shrinking from the idea of returning to Longhurst, where the happiest days of Frank's boyhood had been spent, and as the state of Lady Rivers's health seemed to make a long residence abroad desirable, they had decided on letting the house for a few years. A tenant had been found just as Sir Francis was about to start for the South of France, to join Alma and Lady Rivers at San Remo, where the twice postponed wedding (for Mrs. Anstice's death had caused a second delay) was at last to take place.

"A very quiet wedding," Wynyard explained, in answer to Mildie's eager questions; he did not know about bridesmaids, but there would certainly be, on both sides, a dearth of relations, unless he could persuade Madame de Florimel to come over from La Roquette, and be present on the occasion. Even Constance Forrest had been obliged to disappoint her sister of her support. After spending a month at San Remo with her mother, she had received a summons from her husband to rejoin him at once at Belforrest, and greatly to Sir Francis's surprise and disappointment had reappeared in London, yesterday. No, Sir John Forrest was not ill, only out of

sorts, and disinclined, Wynyard supposed, to lend the lustre of his own and his wife's presence to the wedding. Something had put him out, and he chose to revenge himself on his wife's relations in that fashion. A wedding without a single guest would be something of a disappointment, he feared, to Lady Rivers, however little he and Alma might care about it.

"And Aunt Rivers will be quite alone after Alma has left her?" inquired Emmie, "for I suppose nothing will keep Sir Francis long from London."

"Not a day after the Christmas holidays are over; it would be cruel to ask such a sacrifice of him," said Wynyard. "I have planned an appeal to Madame de Florimel, and if I can carry her off to San Remo with me, I am not without hope that she will persuade your aunt to return with her, and spend the rest of the winter at La Roquette, where she would be, comparatively speaking, among old friends. Yes," he added, in answer to a look of Emmie's, "I am going straight to La Roquette, when I have finished the business I have undertaken to do for Sir Francis here. If I get through as well as I hope to do, I shall arrive at the château on Christmas-eve, about the time when the church will be lighted up, and our friends flocking to the midnight mass, and as I shall spend Christmas-day there, I cannot fail to come across some of our old acquaintance. Would you like me to take a message from you to Madelon?" He said this in a commonplace tone, letting his eyes rest on Emmie's face, to show that he understood and accepted the footing of ordinary friendliness she had prescribed as the basis on which all future intercourse, including references to old times, was to be placed. He thought it well to make an allusion of the kind at once, since no comfortable relationship could ever be established between them, if either felt that there were topics in the background they had not courage to approach.

In the same spirit Emmie looked bravely back, and answered steadily, "I believe I owe Madelon a present, the cairngorm brooch which, you know, she ought to have had on her wedding-day. It is put away somewhere, and since you are so kind as to offer to see her

for me, I think I will trouble you to take the brooch to her. How long shall you stay at Longhurst? I will send the packet by Casabianca to-night if you are going soon."

Wynyard explained that his business was to look over and bring away certain family letters and relics, chiefly relating to poor Frank, which Sir Francis could not bear to leave in the house, though he shrank from looking them over himself. The business would occupy one day at least, Wynyard thought; "but surely," he added, "we shall meet again? Does not Mrs. West often come up to Longhurst?"

The waggonette was now turning in between two iron gates, and the next instant it drew up before a cottage of rather more size and pretension than an ordinary lodge. The front door stood open, and revealed, beyond the tiny entrance hall, a background of fire-lighted parlour, and cozily-spread tea-table, and the figure of Mrs. West with eager face and outstretched arms, hurrying, at the sound of wheels, to welcome the travellers. There was no time for farewells, scarcely for a handshake; Emmie was out of the waggonette the minute after it stopped, and in her mother's arms, forgetful of everything, even of the conspicuousness of figures in a fire-lit vestibule as seen from the dark road, while her face was pressed against her mother's, in their old fond caress.

At home, after her first independent struggle with the world! What a feeling of rest the thought brought with it, though there was nothing familiar, nothing to make the house she now entered home-like, but the tender clinging touch of the arms around her. Wynyard, who had never had a personal experience of such welcomings, looked curiously out of the gathering darkness back towards that square of warmth and light, and felt himself somewhat lonely and overlooked.

"I had thought of coming down this evening to see your mother," he remarked to Casabianca, who alone lingered a moment, with his hand on the back rail of the waggonette, not covetous of his share of the caresses going, till inquisitive eyes were well out of the way. "I had thought of coming down here again later, but I suspect I should only be in the way. You will want this first evening quite to yourselves, no doubt."

"Mother will, I daresay; she and Emmie won't stop talking and kissing each other till midnight. They might think it a bore, perhaps, if you came in; but never mind, they'll be able to spare me, and if you like, I'll run up after tea and see how you are getting on, in the big house all by yourself. Oh, no, don't object; it'll be no trouble to me. I shan't mind turning out in the dark, and besides, I've a reason of my own. I'm curious to know if they have put down the stair-carpet for you, and how the place looks in 'em. Yes, yes, I'll be sure to come, and I'll tell you what's the joke about Aunt Rivers's stair-carpet when I see you again."

The last sentence was shouted out after the waggonette had started down the darkening road at a rapid pace, which soon reduced the glowing doors and windows of the cottage to small stars of light, shining alluringly through the gathering blackness.

Longhurst was a large, old-fashioned, somewhat dilapidated manor-house, standing in a considerable extent of ill-kept pleasure-ground, which Sir Francis had been lucky enough to purchase on very favourable terms years ago, when the possession of a place of their own in the country had been so exactly the summit of Lady Rivers's ambition, that she did not allow herself to be exacting as to advantages of situation or imposing aspect. Funds had always been wanting for the repairs and embellishments which Lady Rivers planned from year to year, as her views enlarged. Latterly, since her boys had grown up and gone out into the world, and her daughters been introduced, her interest had declined in a place that had only afforded them all a great deal of pleasure, and done less than she had expected towards increasing their consequence in the society where she wanted to shine. She became more and more unwilling to let her daughters waste important months in its solitude, or to spend money on its decoration that might be turned to better account; thus one or two summers had passed, bringing only flying visits from solitary members of the family, and the house had got a disused melancholy look, that struck Wynyard painfully, as he wandered about the well-remembered rooms in the interval between his arrival and the dinner-hour. He thought the whole

family might have been dead, to account for the funereal aspect that, to his fancy, hung over the old furniture, and the familiar nooks and corners, associated with so much mirth and fresh young life, such eager hopes and such dear love. Was it the hopes, the aspirations, the loves that were dead, that looked back with ghostly faces at him from every favourite haunt? How vividly the groups of youthful figures came back, and arranged themselves in the old way—Frank, Agatha, Constance, Lawrence, Alma, most changed of all! Oh no! himself most changed—who, on the eve of rejoining her, of making her his own for ever, could have a doubting, a disloyal thought of her—his own poor Alma! Poor!—had she come to be that, then, she who had been the radiant queen of his fancy, the loveliest, the rarest, the bright particular star set up for his heart's distant adoration?

Wynyard was pacing up and down the old school-room when these thoughts rose the thickest, and Alma's face kept coming back to him with the various expressions it had worn—in many an eager discussion they had had, standing or sitting just there or just here, on the spot over which he was walking at the moment—proud, tender, aspiring, contemptuous and satirical at times, but frank and true always. Why would not this remembered Alma correspond more exactly with the Alma to whom he was going? What had come between his old dream and his present possession? Could he have believed it of himself, that he would pace this room the week before his wedding, with such doubts in his heart as he felt to-night; surely it was himself that was changed, not Alma? He must have grown suspicious and hard, not so ready as he ought to be, to make allowance for the natural effect of the ordeal she had passed through since she grew up. Could the finest nature have borne it quite unharmed? Was it not unreasonable in him to be disappointed, because her girlish frankness was changed into that indefinable something which always seemed to hide her true self from him now? Where was his faith, where the patience with which he had once thought to win her through years of waiting? Could they not win back for him his

old Alma, as dear, as true, as frank-hearted as ever, when deteriorating influences were shut out by his closer possession? Wynyard's paces up and down the solitary dark room grew brisker as the more soothing thoughts asserted themselves, and drove away the gloom that had taken possession of him since morning. He had been battling all day against what he told himself was an unworthy suspicion, and now he concluded resolutely to turn his back upon it. He would not make that comparison between sentences in Alma's late letters, and some information received that morning respecting Lady Forrest's doings at San Remo, which he feared might convict Alma of practising a good deal of reserve towards him, if not of putting a false colour on recent events. He would not be critical in weighing shades of meaning to see how far her narratives were purposely coloured; it was, perhaps, almost a necessity with Alma's subtle intellect to give to every event she related the colouring she wished it to wear, words would inevitably take that form of advocacy with her. How he had once admired the graceful address, the sparkling acuteness that had given her a magician's power of making everybody think as she pleased. And when the power had been exercised to shield someone else from blame—one of the boys, poor Frank, perhaps, or Constance—he had been used to see nothing but the generosity, the warmth of love, that gave the impulse to her subtle intellect. Could he not be as lenient now, when there were really important interests at stake, and it was still Constance whose levities needed the concealment of a mist of words?

Wynyard succeeded in reasoning himself into charity again with Alma, but his solitary meal in the dimly-lighted dining-room, which had seen so many pleasant Christmas gatherings, was sufficiently depressing to make him not altogether displeased when Casabianca appeared, just as he was turning out for a stroll with a cigar in the grounds, before settling to the melancholy business to which he intended to give the rest of the evening. It was a soft, cloudy, winter's night, with occasional gleams of a full moon through deep chasms of cloud, and fitful gusts of rain-laden west wind, making wild music among the old oaks of the avenue they strolled up and down.

Wynyard's thoughts soon wandered away from his companion, and were only brought back by fits and starts when his talk touched upon topics that fitted in uncomfortably with his own reflections. Perhaps a spice of provocation at the slight to his powers of entertainment, and of mischievous pleasure, when he discovered that he had hit upon a topic that could produce a sensation, gave Casabianca courage to venture again and again on ground that he well knew to be dangerous.

"You don't understand what I mean by saying that it's very good-natured of Mrs. Kirkman, the old fat one, you know, to make much of Emmie, and never to say anything disparaging of her—well—of her relations, when she is in the room. You don't understand? I should have thought you'd have had more nous. I understood well enough when Emmie and mother talked about it just now. Mother began by telling Emmie something that old Mrs. Kirkman was heard to say when she was down here about Al—— what, you think I had better not repeat it, as it was not meant for you to hear? Oh, as you please; I don't care to repeat what people ain't anxious to hear, only I thought you wanted to understand, you gave such a start when I began about the Kirkmans at first. I've plenty to say, if you'll only listen. I had begun to tell you the names of our eleven, and the matches they played in, last year, and can go on with that if you like it better." By the time they had again reached the same spot in the avenue, however, Casabianca, like a fly driven from a sore spot, was circling round to the vexed topic again. "By Jove! how jolly the moon looks, coming out from under that cloud. How it shows off everything, to be sure. There, now, just look between the trees, do you see something shining on that little hill to your right, a good way off? Can you guess what it is? I can. It's the great gilt ball on the observatory at Golden Mount, shining like a star. If you carry your eye down, you'll see the outline of all the other buildings against the sky. A big place, isn't it? That second larger spot shining in the moonlight, will be the dome of the great glass-house, the winter-garden, that everyone talks about so much."

Wynyard stood still as he was desired, and looked at

the massive outline with some curiosity, remembering as he looked, that Alma had reproached him for not having accompanied her there, to guard her against being overcome by its attractions. This time last year the ordeal was going on; the gilt ball and the winter-garden, the great staring, magnificent new house were being weighed against such recollections and such confessions of early love as he had been thinking over in the school-room just now. How near had she ever been in thought to yielding? He hated the question, and himself for asking it.

"Yes, I suppose that is Golden Mount," he remarked, as they turned back towards the house, "but how do you come to recognise it so quickly? You have never been here since it was built, have you?"

"No, but I heard enough about it, and on a day that I'm not likely to forget. It was when they settled I was to go to Christ's Hospital, and Emmie travel abroad with Aunt Rivers instead of Alma; I was in Aunt Rivers's dressing-room, and I heard every word of the talk, and I have not forgiven Uncle and Aunt Rivers for it yet. Not that I ain't getting on very well where I am, and like it fairly, petticoats and all. But it was riling, you must allow, to hear oneself treated as a sort of make-weight, thrown in to persuade mother to further Aunt Rivers's plans for securing Golden Mount to Miss Alma. How she went on about the Kirkmans and Golden Mount; and what a pity it would be to take Alma out of the way of the good luck that had come to her. Just for nothing, too, as it turned out; for, after all the trouble they took, and the talk and fuss there was about it, Alma—but, oh! I say, I beg your pardon, I'd forgotten 'twas you she was engaged to now—I had, indeed, just for the moment. I really was thinking only of the shame it was that I should have to wear these miserable yellow stockings so long after she has changed her mind, and got something she likes still better for herself. I can't change, and get what I like as easily as all that, you see."

Casa looked boldly up into Wynyard's face for sympathy and condolence, but seeing an expression there that startled him, he was awed into silence for the whole length of the avenue, till they were again

standing before the front door; then, fearing to be dismissed without an invitation to enter, he found his voice again.

"You are not offended, are you? I really did not mean to say anything you would not like to hear, but you see things are so changed. When I'm talking to you like this, it does slip out of my head that you are Lord Anstice, and that it's you my cousin Alma is going to marry. I never thought of such a thing when I knew you before."

"As your cousin condescending to marry me, eh?" said Wynyard, smiling; "you are an outspoken young man, certainly, and I don't know that we need quarrel for that; but I advise you to take a hint and be a little more discreet in your reminiscences when we meet again. Dismiss all you have heard, or imagined, about the Kirkmans from this day forth from your memory, and we shall get on all the better together. You understand?"

"All right," said Casa, imperturbably; "and you'll let me come in, won't you, to take a look round the place? Perhaps I shan't have another chance, as the new people are coming in soon; and besides, there was something else I wanted to tell you."

Wynyard dryly remarked that Casa's confidences so far had not been so agreeable as to make him particularly anxious for more.

Casa's loquacity was not so easily quenched, however.

"It has not anything whatever to do with the Kirkmans, I promise you," he began, when he had taken a hasty survey of the hall and staircase, and, returning to the dining-room, had planted himself on the edge of a bureau Wynyard was unlocking. "It ain't about the Kirkmans; it's only something I remember about the last time I was here—something that's on my mind, and that I daren't talk about at home, so I'd best have it out with you and get rid of it. It all came back upon me when Mildie mentioned in the waggonette that mother had been busy seeing to the big house being smartened up and made ready for you. Poor mother! I know what she was thinking about when she had the stair-carpet put down, and ordered a fire to be lighted in the hall, and that great

curtain put up to keep out the draught; and you ain't the delicate little chap that has just had scarlet fever. I daresay you wonder (knowing what the Riverses are, as you must do by this time) to hear that we Wests were ever invited to pay a visit to Longhurst; but we weren't invited. This is how it happened. Some of us were ill two years ago. Mother took us to Ramsgate for a month, and father came to fetch us home at the end of the time. Poor little Willie had been getting worse instead of better, and as mother heard Aunt Rivers was staying here all by herself, she wrote to propose that she and father and Willie and I should come to Longhurst on the way home, and stop a few days, to give us all another change. Father did not like it, but mother hoped that when Aunt Rivers saw how seedy poor little Willie was, she would invite him to stay on in the country for the rest of the summer, and keep me with him to amuse him when she and father went back to town. So she risked it, though I know she was trembling all through the journey lest anything should happen to annoy poor father, and make him feel he was not welcome. Well, we got here in a cab, for there was no waggonette sent to meet us, and I shall never forget the look that came over father's face as soon as ever we were well inside the house; no stair-carpet, no curtains, everything done up in dirty newspapers, and Aunt Rivers taking us to a little fusty-smelling back room, in the servants' part of the house, to have a school-room tea there all together. Father, who if he had nothing to eat but the sole of an old shoe, would expect it to be served to him properly! Aunt Rivers kept on explaining to mother how she was here alone because Sir Francis and her daughters had gone off to stay with some grand countess or another, and that she would not make strangers of relations like ourselves, by having the house put in order for us. 'Poor relations,' I heard father mutter to himself, and mother turned white, for she knew well enough then what would happen, and it did happen. Father insisted on our leaving Longhurst early next morning, though it was a wet day, and Willie's cough had been very bad all night, and a miserable journey we all had home to be sure. Everybody but me down in the lowest dumps you can imagine.

Willie died, you know, a month or two afterwards. I don't suppose anything could have made any difference. No one said a word; I don't think mother ever told even Emmie about the stair-carpets; but I know what she thought, though I never talked of it to anyone until now. She used to come up into our attic of a night to hear the little ones say their prayers, and when she said the Lord's Prayer with Willie the last week or two, and he was almost too weak to speak the words, I noticed a choking there was in her voice, whenever she came to—'As we forgive them that trespass against us.' I know she had a struggle every night to do that for Aunt Rivers—thinking of those blessed stair-carpets. I ain't a saint like mother, and I can't say that I have forgiven her yet, so far at least, as to forget the difference between rich and poor relations. I heard you say once that you had been snubbed by her yourself when you were poor, so you won't be very much surprised or disgusted, will you, if I don't change my feelings towards Aunt Rivers, even when she is your mother-in-law, and Alma your wife? As you did talk of asking me to come and see you at Leigh, it's only fair to give you warning."

"Very well," said Wynyard, "I am warned; and now, if you will leave the bureau, and let me get at the drawer I want, I'll promise you that at all events you shall find carpets on the stairs whenever you come to Leigh. I would forget that old unfortunate visit to Longhurst if I were you; it's a bad habit to think of oneself as a poor relation, and you won't have any temptation to it for the future, with Alma and me. There, let us shake hands, and say good-bye, on an understanding that no allusions to Kirkmans or stair-carpets are to be allowed when we meet again."

It was a full hour after Casabianca took his departure before Wynyard turned his attention to the contents of the bureau-drawer, and meanwhile his thoughts were not pleasantly occupied. A schoolboy's foolish chatter, telling him nothing new, for, as Casabianca had truly said, he had known Lady Rivers too long and too well to receive any fresh light on her character at this date. What did that matter to him, so long as Alma stood clear, in generous truthfulness, and strong youthful indignation at

the petty meannesses and worldlinesses, amid which she had grown up? Yes, so long as she *did* stand quite clear. His thoughts ever circling round the same point, did not come to any definite conclusion, but they had one practical result, which, however, Wynyard did not consciously connect with his doubts of Alma. He avoided the inmates of the north lodge during the two days of his stay at Longhurst, and managed to complete his business and execute various commissions for Lady Rivers without making an appeal to Mrs. West for help. It might be her sad face he dreaded the sight of, or it might be Emmie's. Anyhow, his determination to keep out of their way went so far, that, when, during a last walk in the grounds he saw two distant figures in black approaching the house, he turned hastily in an opposite direction, and set out on a long circuit of the park, which did not bring him home again till after dusk. A little packet had been left at the house while he was away, and caught his eye as soon as he entered his sitting-room. It was directed to Madame Antoine Barbou, Le Vallon des Orangiers, La Roquette—favoured by Lord Anstice, in the corner.

Wynyard thought, as he put it into his pocket-book, that Madame Barbou was tolerably certain to receive her long-delayed wedding present this time. The ruby ring still lingered in an inner fold of the same receptacle, just where he had put it when he took it from Emmie's little letter; and it had so often brought back disagreeable reflections when his eye fell upon it unexpectedly, that he was not likely to lose a good occasion to rid himself of it. Objects that awaken painful recollections, however, have something the character of birds, and sometimes persist in attaching themselves to those who most wish them away. The cairngorm brooch had not yet come to the end of its adventures as a love-token, and was not destined to grace Madame Barbou's bosom till days when her bridal honours had long been left behind.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

LA ROQUETTE IN WINTER.

I have been here before, yet scarce can tell
The outline of the hills;
The light is changed—another voice doth swell
In those wild-sounding rills.

I have been here before, in sun and shade
A blythe green place it seemed;
Here have I talked with friends, sweet songs have made,
And lovely things have dreamed.

THE magnolia-trees in front of the château looked almost as fresh and green as they had looked in the spring, when Wynyard came out on the morning after his arrival at La Roquette, to take a turn under them before the early breakfast, which Madame de Florimel always took, English-fashion, with her guests, in her favourite sitting-room opening on to the garden. At the first glance round, Wynyard thought there was very little in the scene before him to mark the change of season. The sunshine falling on the dry, dusty road was almost as hot and yellow as when he had last basked in it; the shadows of the broad-leaved trees lay as clearly defined along the path; the olives on the slope above were only a shade greyer; the pines on the near hills a thought more dusky; the distant mountains as softly shaded in lilacs and blues, till they melted into the snow-range, which had not yet received its winter crown of new snow. Hardly a touch of change to show that it was midwinter, instead of spring, revealed itself to his first eager gaze; but when his eye had for some time taken in the familiar beauty of the landscape, a perception stole in, that he was viewing it under a new aspect. One little token after another forced itself on his notice, showing that even here, in nature's choicest playground, the active pulsings of growth and change had been stilled for a time. It was not, as in northern climates, a frozen death-like trance that held the forces of nature in abeyance: here it was rather as if a musical pause had come in the full-toned chorus of life—a moment's lull—to prepare the year for the fresh burst of music, the new throb of vitality which vineyard

and garden, olive-grove and hill, were awaiting. Yes, it was winter, not spring. Down there a fig-tree shows its dry skeleton arms among the evergreen shrubs, a memento that "the time for the singing of birds" is not yet. The quince-trees are bare on the church-hill, the small stunted oaks by the river show conspicuous in a rich red-brown livery of faded leaves. It is winter, not spring. Nature has fallen asleep here too, but on a couch of flowers, overlaid with the treasures she dropped from her hands when she went to sleep; richly-scented overblown roses, branches laden with luscious slow-ripening fruits. Fresh evidence of this was before Wynyard's eyes when he turned from looking over the landscape to the château. There, at the open window, with a bunch of yellow tea-roses in her hand, stood Madame de Florimel, beckoning him to come in to breakfast. Close beside her (for a few minutes ago the early morning mass had come to an end, and the women were flocking out of church) stood Madelon, just lifting from a basket on her arm the Christmas offering she had brought for madame, a great bunch of grapes from the sheltered vineyard behind Père Barbou's tall white house on the hill, where grapes ripened slowly, and grew luscious and full-flavoured at Christmas-time, with some red *pommes d'amour* from her mother's garden in the valley—the whole fastened together in a wreath, which, in spite of its Bacchanalian character, madame was expected to suspend in the hall, in honour of the *belle fête* Madelon was wishing her, when Wynyard came up. Fresh dimples and smiles broke out on her pleasant face at sight of him.

"Ah! if Antoine had but known that monsieur would be visible so early, the hope of seeing him would have brought him quickly enough to the village. Truly he had not been so eager to take the first opportunity of attending to his duty as might be wished. Monsieur would understand, however, there were the mules to attend to, and the men were all alike, ready at an excuse to send their mothers and wives to pray in their place. Not that Antoine was altogether negligent, or would fail to be present at the great mass at eleven o'clock, and to pay his respects to madame and to monsieur also."

Madelon's shyness had altogether melted away during her eight months of matronhood, and she chattered on volubly, while she turned over the remaining contents of her basket to pick a bouquet for Wynyard from the flowers that had been scattered over her offering.

"*Tenez,*" she cried at last, "I've no May roses to offer monsieur to-day, but here is a little bunch of white violets, the first I have gathered since last spring. What is more, I plucked them from about the roots of the old olive-tree near my mother's house, where Mademoiselle Emmée loved to sit when the anemones were in bloom. Have I not pointed out the place a hundred times to Antoine, and do we not speak of the sweet demoiselle, and of monsieur too, every time we pass? Poor as the blossoms are, monsieur will accept them for a fête-day bouquet, and wear them with pleasure even, will he not?"

There was a meaning, congratulatory twinkle in Madelon's bright eyes as she held up her flowers, which Wynyard hardly knew how to meet; and, encouraged perhaps by the shade of embarrassment in his voice when he thanked her, Madelon added: "But how then is the dear, good young lady? Monsieur will have seen her lately, and perhaps even brings a word of greeting from her to us. Ah! how often we talk about her, Antoine and I; and what a happy day that will be for everyone in the valley when monsieur brings her to see us again, as no doubt will happen one day."

After this hint, Wynyard would have found it awkward to bring out the little packet Emmie had entrusted him with, so he confined himself to a promise of calling at Madame Barbou's house in the course of the day, and made a hasty retreat through the window into the salon, where madame was by this time waiting at the breakfast-table to pour out his coffee.

"Do not the people know what is to happen to me on New Year's Day?" he asked Madame de Florimel while he was drinking it. "I should have thought, as gossip is so rife at La Roquette, and its inhabitants take so much kindly interest in my affairs, that the prospect of such an event would have become known among them somehow."

"The news will keep until after the *belle fête* is over," said madame shortly. "We are simple souls here, most of us, with few events in our lives, and the impressions of last spring have not faded from our remembrance as quickly as with people who see more of the world. Let me give my neighbours all the time possible to mitigate their surprise."

This little growl was, however, the only mark of discontent with the present state of affairs that madame permitted herself, during her morning meal with Wynyard, and during the two sunny hours they afterwards spent in strolling about the château-garden. Perhaps she felt that she had gone a little too far even in saying so much as this, for she treated Wynyard to an especially gracious and sympathetic mood for the rest of the morning. Joseph Marie and the château politics were kept in an unusual degree in the background, while she turned the conversation on the late occurrences at Leigh, questioning Wynyard on the particulars of Mrs. Anstice's last illness and death, and listening to his projects for the future well-being of the place of which he was now sole master. Alma's name naturally came in here, and madame went so far as to accord some not ungrudging praise to her beauty, and to the talents for society that would make her a valuable helpmeet to Wynyard when he would have to assume the position among the magnates of the county that was his due. The bell, tinkling for the mid-day service, was heard while they were still talking, and madame hastened into the house to get her prayer-book, and on her return invited Wynyard to accompany her across the road to church. She explained that there was just now no English service within reach—and, besides, how can one help wishing to kneel down with one's neighbours on Christmas Day? All the villagers seemed to be collected on the church hill; and the little open space by the door, under the trees, had been temporarily turned into a miniature fair. Booths had been put up for the sale of cakes flavoured with orange-flower, bon-bons, pictures, and medals; and the young men of the place and the children were hanging in groups about them, proposing, by-and-by, perhaps, to pass into the shady church for a few minutes when the

last bell rang and the host was elevated, so as to secure the consciousness of having fulfilled a duty at the smallest possible expenditure of time. The inside of the church was, however, fairly well filled when madame and Wynyard took their places, just as the small procession, headed by the old curé, had reached the altar. All the candles in the church were lighted, and the various side altars decked with artificial flowers, tawdry, perhaps, and not even clean, but sufficiently attractive to draw a great many eyes to them; round, wondering children's eyes, which had not yet seen the fête flowers so often as not to look in hope of discovering fresh beauties; and aged eyes, to whom they were in truth Ebenezers, witnesses of past blessings, reminders of sorrows overcome, speaking with familiar faces of memories which their yearly reappearance had peacefully measured out. Madame kept her eyes dutifully fixed on her book, but Wynyard allowed his to wander, not critically, but sympathetically to the faces of the worshippers. Was it worship exactly? A service droned on in the old priest's husky monotone, accompanied by the shrill voices of the village scholars. At certain intervals knees were devoutly bent, and heads bowed; a few old women here and there had books in their hands, and their lips went on moving, but on Christmas Day, you see, at La Roquette, it was the custom to bring all the babies, under a year old, to church, to show the progress they had made since their christening to the King of angels in His guise of a baby. How could it be, but that proud young mothers, and doting grandmothers, and sympathetic neighbours, or friends from distant valleys, should notice this progress as well, and telegraph glances of congratulation and inquiry to each other across the church? Toinette, who was married here at this time last year, and who lives ten miles away on the mountain, has brought her baby, and Pauline, who, after seven years of childless marriage, received the crown of motherhood only three months ago, is lifting hers to the height of her arms, that old paralytic Mère Barbou, who only comes to church on Christmas Day, may get a full view of her boy's beauty. Is it worship? Or, if not, may not the loving thoughts that fill hearts to over-

flowing, the friendly sympathetic glances that pass from eye to eye, the soft cooings and babblings, reverently hushed with mothers' kisses—may not these be as acceptable as worship to Him, who makes Himself known as the Babe of Bethlehem to-day? The old verger came round with his jingling pewter-plate before this question received a satisfactory solution in Wynyard's mind, and half-absently, half under the influence of these reflections, he dropped in an offering of English gold pieces, at which Madame de Florimel frowned, for she knew how it would be talked of in the village, and compared with the modest Christmas offering which Monsieur le Comte permitted himself, when he happened to be staying at the château at Christmas-time.

Madame de Florimel had business at Terres Blanches for the afternoon, and when she heard of Wynyard's intention of calling on Madame Antoine Barbou, she proposed that he should drive first to the maisonnette, and then take the short cut through the vineyard to Madame Barbou's house, returning to rejoin her when the visit was paid, so as to secure a passing glimpse of the principal features of her mountain farm, in its winter aspect.

"Not," madame observed, as Wynyard was slowly driving her up the steep hill, where the clump of cactuses grew, "not that I mean now to keep true to the promise I rashly made one afternoon last spring. You may remember, unless more important events have swept everything that was promised, or implied on that occasion out of your mind, my promise to give up possession of Terres Blanches to you as soon as you were married, as well as leave it to you in my will when I died. I have no right to go back from my word, perhaps, but it was given under such different circumstances, on such a different understanding, that I feel sure you will see the reason of my change of purpose."

Wynyard hastened to assure madame that he had no covetous desires after the possession of Terres Blanches, paradise as he held it to be. Then, suddenly withdrawing his eyes from the clump of cactus, at which he had been looking, to fix them steadily on madame's face, he added: "But do not suppose I had forgotten

your generous intention, or anything else that was spoken or implied that day. I have tried too hard to forget it all, to succeed very well; there—that was a larger admission than I at all intended to make, and to qualify it, and justify myself somewhat, I should like you to know that no other promise was made to be broken, that day, but your own.”

Madame put her hand over Wynyard's unoccupied hand, and her face cleared.

“That is well; that relieves me of some self-blame, at all events. And now, one thing more, you were not engaged to Miss Rivers the whole time—you were not playing with my dear little Emmie, and deceiving me, just when I thought we were more united in heart than I have been with any relative for years.”

It was Wynyard's face that clouded now. Madame de Florimel was surprised to see the deep flush of anger and pain that overspread it.

“Do you take me for a villain?” he cried. “I wonder you let me come to see you, and sit beside you in the carriage if you have been thinking such things of me. I wonder you ever spoke to me again.”

“Do you?” madame answered. “Alas! you see I know already too much of men! I should have to be very silent—there would have been very little intercourse with those belonging to me in my life, if I had felt myself entirely cut off from them at every offence. You must allow, too, remembering our conversation the last time we were at Terres Blanches together, that there was much in your conduct that may well have puzzled me.”

“And myself too,” said Wynyard, gloomily. “Don't expect me to explain or excuse myself, for I can't. In spite of a good deal of curious self-questioning, I believe I have as little comprehension of how it has all come about, as you can have. ‘Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?’ I should have asked, if anyone had prophesied the various changes of mind I have passed through since this time last year. What remains, however, is that I am to be married on New Year's Day to Alma Rivers, whom I loved long ago, and do love, and there is no use in saying more about it. Luckily, there is the maisonnette in sight already, and if I mistake

not, Jean Baptiste has spied us out from the top of the medlar-tree, where he was no doubt looking after the last gleanings of madame's fruit. He will have roused the house, and there will be a crowd at the gate to welcome us before we have managed this last steep bit of the road. If I wish to escape further embarrassing questions I think I had better beat a retreat through the lucerne and round by the rose-tree hedge into the valley."

But madame would not hear of her escort deserting her thus basely in sight of the goal. She insisted on being driven up to the front door of the maisonnette.

When once they had alighted together, she detained Wynyard another minute or two—minutes that had the destinies of two lives on their wings—to observe how many summer flowers were lingering in the sunny front border that caught every ray of southern sunshine. Yet even here, in spite of genial warmth and flowers, it was winter that reigned, not spring.

"What was there in the smiling landscape to betoken his sovereignty?" Wynyard asked himself, when at last madame had set him free to take the road to the valley. Was it the silence? Ah yes, how still everything was around him.

Wynyard stopped and listened. He had moved so far away from Madame de Florimel and La Fermière, that their voices, eager on some domestic matter, made only one note in the distance. What a contrast it was to the full chorus of sounds he had been used to hear on this very spot a few months ago! The green frogs were all silent, lying hidden in their oval-shaped tank at the bottom of the garden. The cicadas' eternal song had ceased from the trees and the grass. No nightingales called to each other now from side to side of the ravine, nor answering human voices of labourers at work among the vines. A depth of quiet reigned from hill to hill as far as the eye could reach. No movement anywhere, not even the flutter of a bird.

A minute longer, and the deep stillness to which Wynyard listened was broken. A shrill whistle came, and the sound of regular footsteps pattering down the road. The *facteur*, with his bag of letters, bringing news from the outside world, had come in sight of the

maisonnette, and was calling the attention of the inhabitants to his approach.

Wynyard, though he was already close to the vineyard-gate, turned and walked back towards the house. The pause of thought, the hush, the sacred silence was over—at least for him. Here was business, here was anxiety, personified by the old *facteur*, and he had of his own accord gone to meet it.

Madame de Florimel and La Fermière came up and stood with Wynyard watching the old man as he unstrapped his wallet, at the bottom of the steps where Emmie used to stand expecting him.

The last letter to come out was one for Wynyard, and madame handed it to him with a meaning smile, not lost on any of the bystanders.

"From San Remo, of course?" she said.

"Not at all," Wynyard answered, after a hasty glance at the address. "Do not you see the English stamp and postmark? It comes from Leigh, and has gone first to Longhurst, I see, and been directed on."

"Ah, I only glimpsed a lady's hand, and drew my own conclusion from the thickness of the letter. Not a safe proceeding with a man of such large correspondence with ladies as yourself."

"That large correspondence is another false conclusion. I have only two lady correspondents in the world, and this one of the two, Miss Moore, can hardly have anything more important to write to me about than the Leigh charities, which fell into her hands during Mrs. Anstice's illness."

The talk was in English, but Madame Dallon seemed interested in it, for she drew a little nearer, and her broad smiling face suddenly took an expression of perplexity and recollection.

"Monsieur has a letter," she exclaimed, putting her finger to the end of her nose, with a puzzled air, "*Tenez, regardez un peu*, will he permit that I cast my eye on the outside? Yes, yes, that recalls to my mind something which escaped me till this very moment, but of which I doubtless ought to have spoken to madame some weeks ago. It was during the time while we were busy drawing off the wine from our big cask, that wine which tasted so well, and which madame ordered us to put into

bottles to be ready for Monsieur le Comte, when he should send for it. Madame will remember the anxiety it cost us, and will not blame me too much for having put the letters aside on the shelf, the moment after I discovered them lying among the corks in my bureau-drawer, and for having always forgotten to speak about them to madame till now, when, seeing this letter in monsieur's hand, recalled them to my mind. I speak of two thick letters directed to Monsieur Anstice, which have remained unopened in my bureau-drawer among the corks since monsieur left La Roquette last spring. No, madame, I am not mistaken," for Wynyard and Madame de Florimel simultaneously uttered an exclamation of incredulity. "Stay, they are on the shelf at this moment, and if monsieur and madame will follow me into the north store-room, they will see."

"Printed papers, no doubt," remarked Wynyard, "which in a lazy mood I must have buried among the corks one afternoon, though I don't remember anything of the kind. It is hardly worth while waiting for them, is it?"

He followed Madame de Florimel into the house, however, with some dawning curiosity, as to which of the moods of last spring, what particular day or incident, the disinterred letters would bring back. It was quite certain to be one, to which his present feelings were sufficiently alien, to make the contrast piquant.

Madame Dallon had the packet in her hand already, when he entered the room, and was blowing away the accumulated dust of many weeks from its upper surface before handing it to him.

Madame de Florimel intercepted it on its way, to satisfy her curiosity first.

"Two letters unopened, positively, you see, Wynyard, and their latest postmark the 3rd of May. So long ago, and you have never missed them! I trust no important communication may be found within."

"Not likely," said Wynyard, stretching out his hand to reclaim his own long-lost property.

"But how could Lord Anstice's letters have found their way into your bureau-drawer among the corks, Madame Dallon?" persisted Madame de Florimel.

"The 3rd of May; why, that was the very morning

we started on our mountain tour! They must have been delivered here an hour or two before we left. I recollect it all perfectly; Jean Baptiste brought me some letters while I was waiting in the carriage. Why were not these among them? If you remember, Wynyard, you never came up to the house at all that day."

Wynyard made no answer; he had turned over the uppermost letter with the London postmark directed in a clerkly hand, and had come upon a half-sheet of note-paper which lay between the two letters, entangled in the folds of the second envelope; he was stupidly staring at some words written on it, as if the surprise of seeing them were drawing his eyes from his head.

Madame turned impatiently to La Fermière.

"But this is perplexing," she went on; "how can I have confidence for the future in allowing my letters to be kept at the maisonnette, if accidents of this kind can happen? If Jean Baptiste is capable of hiding letters among the corks, how do I know how many of my son's may not be lying in other drawers of the bureau at this moment? It must be inquired into!"

"Jean Baptiste—the poor child!" exclaimed madame, hotly: "how should he be capable of such conduct? If you talk of hiding, I may as well tell madame the truth, though the notion that the young English lady, who was so proud as hardly to allow herself to be spoken with, should have any other *motif* in putting the letters into the drawer than that nobody wanted them, had not entered my mind, till madame used the word 'hiding.' Indeed, I should have made a point of bringing the packet to the château myself, had not Jean Baptiste told me, on the very day when we turned them out from among the corks, that he himself saw the young lady drop the letters into the drawer and shut it quickly, while he was looking on at her through the window. What could I suppose but that she would tell madame and monsieur what she had done, when she joined them in the carriage half an hour afterwards, and that they had not thought it worth while to inquire further? If I have judged wrongly, I trust madame will forgive me. I trust, indeed, that monsieur finds no ill tidings in the letters that have been so long in coming to him."

The last sentence was uttered in quite a different tone of voice from the previous ones. Madame Dallon's eyes had strayed, while she was speaking, to Wynyard's face, and a sudden perception of how strangely it had changed during the last few minutes, had come over her. Madame de Florimel looked also, and there was a sudden hush in the little room.

Wynyard had drawn out the half-sheet of note-paper that lay between his letters, while Madame Dallon was speaking, and, crushing it in his hand, had thrown it from him on to the ground, and then it was, when the writing on the second envelope became visible, that his countenance changed, so as to attract the attention of the other two.

"What is it, Wynyard?" Madame de Florimel said at last, alarmed by his fixed stare at the paper, and the grey pallor to which his cheeks and lips had turned. "What is it? You look as if you had seen a ghost!"

"Something like it," Wynyard answered, drawing a deep breath, and recovering himself with an effort.

"Look, madame—but you will not know the writing as well as I do. Poor Ralph! This must have been the last letter he ever wrote, and the sending it almost the last thing he ever did. For, see, one of the postmarks is Strome, the place from which the boat sailed that went down with him."

"And to think of a letter of so much interest remaining for eight months shut up in Madame Dallon's drawer!" exclaimed Madame de Florimel. "One cannot understand such carelessness; one cannot imagine how such a thing could have occurred!"

"But I have been explaining to madame precisely how it did happen. Shall I then call for Jean Baptiste, and will madame hear herself what he has to say? There can be no question of forgetting, for it was on the morning of Madelon Claire's wedding, and Jean Baptiste followed the *facteur* to the door, and saw him give the letters into the young English lady's own hand. Like a child he peeped in at her through the open window of this room to which she had carried them; and if madame or if monsieur would like to cross-question him——"

But Wynyard made a violent gesture of dissent.

"No, no, let it alone; ask no more questions. For Heaven's sake, madame, let the matter rest!" he exclaimed, almost angrily to Madame de Florimel, who began to remonstrate. "Excuse me, I must be alone to read my letters, and I am going now to the valley. If I do not come back by the time you have finished your business here, do not wait for me. You will be able to find someone else to drive you home, shall you not?"

"Yes, yes," said madame, "go, but mind you come back to the château before dark, and looking a little less miserable if you can. After all, we have known of your poor cousin's death this eight months, and that a letter, written by him a long time ago, should come to hand here, is startling, certainly; but it does not alter anything."

Wynyard was out of the house before madame finished speaking, and as she did not, after his entreaty, like to question La Fermière further, and as the business which had occupied her a few minutes ago seemed of small interest compared to this affair of the letters, she remained for some time longer in the little store-room, casting searching glances up at the high shelves, down into the deep drawers, in hopes of discovering some clue to the satisfaction of her curiosity. Her eye fell at last on the crumpled half-sheet of foreign note-paper which Wynyard had thrown from him, and feeling convinced that whomsoever it concerned, it ought not to be left for everybody's inspection, she picked it up, smoothed it out carefully, folded it, and put it inside her glove, to restore it to its owner, if indeed Wynyard were its rightful owner.

Madame had had no intention of reading the writing; but in the process of smoothing out the paper the signature, and a few words that went before, almost forced themselves upon her notice. "I hope to hear soon that you have acted successfully on my hint; I do so want one of us to be happy. Your sister, Constance Forrest."

The words did not at first convey any particular meaning to her mind, but she reverted to them in thought again and again, while she hastily finished her business with Madame Dallon, during her solitary drive home, and during the long hours when she waited in the chilly dimly-lighted château drawing-room for Wynyard's return.

It was dark, pitch dark, before her waiting was over. Madame became uneasy, and even went again and again to the windows and undid the jalousies to look out on the road, made dimly visible by the reflected lights from the houses in the village. What could there be in those letters of eight months ago to cause a person to stay out so many hours in the dark and increasing chill of a winter's evening? Madame would not allow herself to feel positively alarmed, but the time passed slowly, and she could not, by the most vigorous efforts, force herself to take in the purport of the Christmas Day sermon she set herself to reading, when the lights were brought in. Sometimes it was poor Ralph Anstice's handwriting on the outside of that letter, which floated between her eyes and the printed words; sometimes it was the sentence signed "Constance Forrest," which perhaps she ought never to have read, and which now suggested a solution of the mystery of the hidden letters, that would look probable, however reluctant she felt to entertain it. Should she mention the suspicion to Wynyard? How could she find words in which to convey such an insinuation against the woman who was to be his bride next week? On the other hand, how was a misgiving of such magnitude to be borne in silence? In spite of all her thinking, madame could not come to any decision.

CHAPTER XL.

LOVE'S VAIN EXPENSE.

How strange to commune with the dead!
Dead joys, dead loves; and wishes thwarted;
Here's cruel proof of friendships fled,
And, sad enough, of friends departed.

WYNYARD, meanwhile, had taken the road into the valley, making his way at a rapid pace through the little pine-wood, and down a steep winding-path, to the heart of the ravine. He passed the entrance to Antoine Barbou's house on the hill without noticing it, and was equally oblivious of the picturesque winding-path he had once helped Emmie West to climb, which led to the Orange-

tree House. The original purpose of his walk had entirely passed from his mind, and he was now only anxious to be alone with his own thoughts, and to find a spot where he should be free from every possibility of interruption, before he proceeded to examine the letters that had come into his possession by such a strange chance. Poor Ralph! The touch of the paper upon which his fingers had rested so long ago was like the unexpected clasp of a vanished hand held across a dark gulf of silence. But it was not that thought that kept Wynyard's mind in a whirl of perplexity and agitation as he walked rapidly on. The prospect of having a last word from a lost friend, of receiving perhaps some small everyday request or trifling commission from one who had passed beyond the reach of service, would have been, not painful, but soothing, after the first shock of surprise was over. What really troubled Wynyard was the fact that these letters had been so long in coming to him. He hardly dare ask himself what motive had prompted the hand that dropped them into the bureau-drawer, out of his reach possibly for ever! He had heard the conversation between Madame de Florimel and Madame Dallon, and he understood quite distinctly that it was of Alma they spoke, and of what they accused her. The impression had come to him through the tumult of emotion awakened by the first sight of Ralph's handwriting—a muffled blow which he had received half-dreamily, half-stupidly at first. Then, for a little while, he fought hard against the conviction, as the particulars related grew clear in his memory, and he perceived how they fitted in with other circumstances and brought a complete explanation of many enigmas. Next came back the impression left on his eye, rather than on his mind, by the writing on the half-sheet of note-paper entangled between his letters. "Your affectionate, Constance Forrest," and something about a hint and a wish. Ah yes! and Constance Forrest had been one of the first people to hear about Ralph's death, Lawrence had told him that in his letter; the sentence, hardly noticed at the time, recurred to his memory now with a bitter significance. Hateful as the suspicion was, facts pointed too clearly towards it, for it to be kept at bay any longer.

Alma, then, had heard of Lord Anstice's death some days before it was known to him. The tidings had evidently reached her, in a letter from her sister, on the very day they started on their journey up the mountain; and she had kept back his letters of that morning for fear they should convey the news to him too soon for her purpose. That was the explanation of her love confession by the river. She had known of his change of fortune all the time; when she had shed those tears over her drawing that had moved him so deeply, when she had reproached him for misjudging her, when she had held up her tearful face for the betrothal kiss; it was the man who could make her a countess she had kissed, not her old love. And he had sometimes been such a fool as to imagine that she had loved him the less for his prosperity, that her late shyness and coldness had arisen solely from disappointment that she had lost the chance of proving her love to be disinterested, and must consent to receive more than she had bargained for, when she had accepted him! He had deceived himself about her, so far as that; and all the while she was rejoicing in having successfully manoeuvred, which was the first consideration with her. Wynyard came to a sudden pause in his rapid walk as his mind reached this conclusion. He had been hurrying blindly on, as if rapid motion could carry him out of the reach of the conviction that was gaining on him. Now he stood still, the worst was here in his mind and in his heart. For a little while the dark floods of anger and pain overwhelmed him; his head swam round and his eyes darkened, and he was forced to lean against the friendly trunk of an old olive-tree while he wrestled with himself and strove to recover a degree of calmness.

Once before his love had received, as he believed at the time, a death-blow, and he had felt as if all that was best in himself must die with it. He had then seemed to see his love, the ideal of his youth, stricken down and lying dead, a cold discrowned corpse, in his heart. Here again was the same pain, not so sudden or so sharp perhaps—for had Alma ever quite regained her old empire over his imagination?—but profounder, more despairing; for, crowned or discrowned, loved or un-

loved, she was to be his wife before the week was out. That faint silver bow in the sky, which he could just see through the silvery olive-branches, would wax into their honeymoon! He must go to meet the day, that ought to be the crowning day of his life, with this doubt, this death in his heart, conscious all through his life of deceit, of rottenness, where he would fain trust most utterly. Wynyard tried hard to conquer his anger and the sense of injury he felt from having been so played upon, and to hush these into pity and forgiveness. Well, she should have what she had plotted to gain; and if the tender, adoring love, the high esteem once hers, was now wounded to death, she would perhaps never discover the hurt to which it had been subject, never recognise it as a loss. Love had counted for nothing with her, beside the wealth and the rank that would be hers all the same.

The gathering darkness in the ravine aroused Wynyard to a consciousness of where he was, and what had still to be done. He had determined to read Ralph's letter before he returned to the château, while he was out of reach of Madame de Florimel's kindly, if perhaps too inquisitive eyes, and he perceived that unless he betook himself to the task at once, there would not be light enough to make out the writing. The spot where he had stopped abruptly, led to the end of the ravine where the path turned and sloped upwards through terraces of olives and belts of pines to the high mountain road above; and, before he took the letters from his pocket, he climbed the ascent, to a point on the hill-side, where the rays of the setting sun still lingered. There he found a seat, on the felled trunk of a pine-tree, and settled himself to read. At the moment, this spot was somewhat less silent and solitary than all the rest of the road had been; for a flock of sheep and goats, led by a little shepherdess, had followed him up the ascent, and were now spreading over the brow of the hill. The barking of the dog, the tinkling of the sheep-bells, and the girl's voice, sometimes calling to her dog, sometimes breaking out into a monotonous song, filled the air and awoke the mountain echoes, with a harmony of rustic sounds, that continued to be heard long after the last

straggler of the flock had disappeared from sight. It was the very same flock of sheep Emmie West had watched, coming down to the valley through the olive-grove, eight months ago, on the evening when, as she believed, she left her careless girlhood behind her. They and their little guardian had made the ascent and descent from hill-top to valley, every day since, tinkling the same bells, singing the same song, without any sense of monotony.

To the little shepherdess, these eight months had been just like any other spring, summer, and autumn, of her quiet life, bringing no changes, but the necessary changes of the season; and there was nothing special in her thoughts to-day, as she climbed and sang, except, perhaps, an underconsciousness that to-day was the day of the great fête, and that all the candles on the altars were lighted for benediction in the church below. That, with her, was cause enough for another louder repetition of the refrain of her canticle as she gained the brow of the hill, and caught a distant glimpse of the church tower—"Ave, ave, Maria."

The monotonous sounds reaching him again and again had a soothing effect on Wynyard's ear, bringing a sense of peace, of wider interests than his own, of some One above all, embracing all, on whom to rest, even if the framework of his own private existence was reeling around him, which steadied him for his reading. He first opened the larger packet, directed to him from his London chambers, and found, as he expected, among the collection of letters of no particular interest, the telegram from Scotland, announcing his cousin's death, and a letter from the friends with whom Mrs. Anstice was staying, urging him to come immediately to Scotland. He could not look at them without a question flashing through his mind, as to how far the circumstances of his life would have been changed, if they had come to him in their natural course. He should certainly have obeyed the urgent letter that summoned him to Scotland, and hurried home by the most direct route, thus avoiding the mountain journey that had thrown him again with Alma. She would never probably have given him that explanation of her relations to Horace Kirkman, which he now

believed to be untrue. The aura of that evening walk through the valley with the village bride, the scent of the gathered quince-blossoms, would have been lingering round his heart, when he first realised his changed fortunes; and the question that would have come spontaneously—he knew it now—would have been, not how the change would affect Alma, but what sort of a look of wondering love and glorified gratitude would dawn on Emmie West's gentle true face, when he told her about it, and asked her to share it with him.

It was worse than useless to picture that look now, he must never allow himself to realise that he had thrown away the true jewel to take the false. The past was past, and the possibilities of eight months ago could not be recalled now any more than the reading of these words of Ralph's, written in full strength and youthful vigour, could bring back the writer to the living world, and to the eager purposes and emotions that had pulsed in his heart while he indited them. It was a long letter for Ralph, Wynyard saw that, when he unfolded the sheet written over in the well-remembered dashing scrawl. What sort of revelation of the dead man's last thoughts would it be?

“DEAR WYNYARD,

“Once more I write to you to help me out of a difficulty; you will call it the worst scrape I've ever got myself into as yet, and I answer triumphantly that at all events it is the last I shall ever ask your good offices to tide me through, for I have taken unto myself another helper and conscience-keeper who will have to bear the responsibility of my escapades for the future. There, the murder is out! I see the dark frown of alarm and anxiety that furrows your brow as you read. Dear old fellow! you are in a great fright; you think I have done for myself altogether now, and that you and my mother will have to sit in sackcloth and ashes over me for the rest of your lives. Cheer up; and you will see 'tis not so bad, when you come to look at it, as it sounds at first. I am married, it is true, married a month ago, and I have not had courage to tell my mother about it yet; but it is going to be the making of me, and I feel

myself another man from the one you have known so long, as I write. Do you remember one evening last November, when you and I got involved in a street-row in which a young lady was knocked down and injured? Do you remember her sister, the pale blue-eyed girl we had noticed before the row began? Perhaps not; for I recollect you had nothing to the purpose to say about her, when, a little time before you went abroad, I turned the conversation on the two Miss Moores, intending to throw out a feeler. I should perhaps have confided in you then—if you had shown more discrimination—a clearer impression of the individuality of the little red-haired sister, as you chose to call her. It is she who is my wife now; we were married in London on the fifth of last month, at St. Saviour's Church, Marylebone; and you must not suppose that the secrecy with which I have conducted my grand *coup*, is due in the smallest degree to my being ashamed of my choice. I glory in it, and would have the whole world to know—except my mother—the only person, you will say, who has any right to complain of not having been consulted beforehand. Well, you know her, and you know how utterly useless it would have been to hope for her consent or sympathy. What is more, I had always, whenever such a thought as marriage crossed my mind, set my heart on having just such a mufti wedding, and just such a honeymoon journey as I absolutely attained; don't ever let us ever say again, that nobody ever realised the summit of his wishes. I don't deserve such happiness, that's the truth. It has, you will be glad to hear, opened my eyes a little to my own shortcomings, and caused me to make sundry resolutions, of which this letter to you is the first-fruit. You see I want to cut off from myself all chance of retreat, in case when I am with my mother and find her hard to come over, I should be disposed to repent my present purpose, and revert to my original design of keeping my marriage quiet for a year or two. It would be the best, or at all events the pleasantest course for me, if my conscience, and Christabel, would let me stick to it. You will keep me up to the mark, I know, and I hope, be sufficiently interested and excited by what I have told you, to make it convenient to hurry back to England, and

come on here as soon as you can, to see the end of the game. My mother has perhaps told you, that she left Leigh two months ago, in a fit of high disgust with me for my frequent absences from home and other misdemeanours. I was courting Miss Christabel Moore, you see, at the time, in the orthodox guise of a young artist (*vide* the Lord of Burleigh), and could not be expected to keep up appearances in other quarters. My mother went off to stay with her friends, the Macphersons, who, for the last two summers have, on her invitation, occupied my old fishing-lodge at Tarver, and effectually shut me out of it. As that is about the worst possible place for my poor mother to go to, in her present state of health, there she went, to spite me, I suppose, and bring me to my senses. And so, the other day, on returning from my quiet wedding-journey, I found a telegram, to say she was taken worse, and wanted me to come to her at once. I hope the increased illness is only an overture to reconciliation, but I can't be sure; and anyway I am sorry for the delay, and have hurried on at inconvenient speed to lessen it as far as possible. I write this letter while I am waiting at the little inn at Strome, for a boat to take me across, and shall give my letter to the waiter to post before I sail. After that I shall look for you to put in an appearance at Tarver shortly, and, as I said before, keep me up to the mark. You may wash your hands after that, of your Benedict cousin,

“ ANSTICE.

“ P.S.—I long for you to see *her*, Christabel; she does not know yet that I am anything but a rather unsuccessful artist, whom she will have all her life to keep up to his work. Though you mayn't believe it, I dread telling her the truth almost as much as I dread telling my mother, lest my courting, and winning, and marrying her in character should not seem so legitimate a joke to her as it did to me when I planned it. She is worth a hundred of me, remember that, and stand up for her, through thick and thin, everywhere, and before everyone, whenever you have the chance, ‘an you love me.’”

Before Wynyard reached the last words the shock of

surprise was over, and his thoughts were busied looking back through a variety of small incidents and signs that had come under his notice during the past year. With the light of this sudden revelation on them, they now seemed significant enough to have prepared him for the news, or, indeed, to have brought it to his knowledge long ere this. Christabel Moore—the dull, drizzling, November evening of Katherine Moore's accident, with all its varied incidents, flashed back on his memory with more vividness of interest than the reality had had at the time. It was the beginning of his intimacy with the Wests—of a great deal else as it seemed; but the bearing of what he had just read on his own future fortunes did not suggest itself yet. He was not ready for that, his thoughts were busily engaged in an effort to straighten out the past and make its mysteries plain. Yes, this was the true explanation of the appearance of the Moores at Leigh, and of their interest in Mrs. Anstice. He recalled an expression he had seen on Katherine Moore's face one day, when Mrs. Anstice had been speaking of her son, which had struck him at the time as too full of pity and comprehension to be natural, coming from a stranger: the little pictures, too, so full of suggestion, the poor widowed bride had consoled herself by painting and sending to her fellow-mourner, whom it seemed she dared not, or did not choose to approach in any other way. This news accounted, too, for some words spoken by Katherine Moore on the last occasion when he had seen her, on the day after Mrs. Anstice's death. Wynyard had thought them at the time rather uncalled-for generalities against confidence in worldly prosperity, and the need in all human lives of preparedness for change, and had only accounted for Katherine Moore's addressing them to him on the supposition that her affection for Mrs. Anstice made her take it amiss that he should stick to his intention of starting on his journey to Italy immediately after the funeral. Her warning words and evident wish for the postponement of his marriage took a fresh significance now with this light on them, and brought him at last to the perception of a possible vital concern of his own in this new aspect of affairs. Then he remembered the letter from Katherine Moore, which the *facteur* had

placed in his hands that day, and taking it out of his pocket prepared to read it, with a foreknowledge in his mind of what it had to tell him. It did not surprise him that the letter began :

“DEAR MR. ANSTICE,

“The last ten days have been a time of bitter anxiety for me, ending in such an overwhelming grief that I have hardly power left to reproach myself, as perhaps I ought, for not having managed to see you before you left Leigh; which I had fully intended to do. I make the first effort I am capable of to write to you, and I trust the letter will reach you a sufficiently long time before your approaching marriage to give you the time you will want for the consideration of its contents. Nothing I can now say, will avail to lessen your right to reproach me for having kept the intelligence I have to give so long from you; I must bear your blame without any hope of forgiveness. The dead you will not reproach or blame, and so I will tell you at once that my beloved sister, Christabel Anstice, died in my arms yesterday evening, after having a few hours before given birth to a son, who is the posthumous child of your cousin Ralph, to whom she was privately married in the April of this year. The child is living, and, as far as we can judge at present, likely to live. My sister has left in writing full particulars of her marriage, and an explanation which I trust you will think sufficient, of her motives for continuing to conceal it after her husband's death. This, and other papers in connection with her affairs, I shall be ready to place in your hands whenever you shall ask for them. My sister learned from her husband to trust you utterly, and in this faith, supported by my own knowledge of your character, I fearlessly confide my little nephew's interest to you. He has no friends in the world but you and me. My sister expressed a last wish to be buried near her husband. I do not urge the request, as it may be out of your power to grant it on so short a notice. I leave it with you, feeling sure that you will do what you can to help me.

“Yours sincerely,

“KATHERINE MOORE.”

The sunshine had left the side of the hill, and there was barely light enough to make out the words, when Wynyard finished reading the last of his letters; but it was still a long time before he bethought himself of leaving his seat upon the fir-stump, and beginning his walk back to the château. He was not thinking actively all this time, nor even feeling very vividly; his prevailing sensation was that of one who, fancying himself other than he is, comes back to the sober realities of everyday life, and turns with relish to substance after so much shadow. Eight months—or was it only an hour? Was he like the barber in the Arabian Nights who dipped his head into a basin of water, and lifted it out again to find that in the interval he had lived through a year of sultan life, and was a barber again? As Wynyard sat looking down from the summit of the firwood, over the valley of La Roquette spread out far down beneath his feet, he could almost have believed something of the kind, and relegated all the events that had befallen him, since he last climbed the brow of the hill from the ravine, to the phantasmagoria of an uneasy dream. He had never really been what he seemed, never really owned any of the possessions that he fancied were his—Alma's heart no more than anything else; it had all been an unreality, all a mistake together. He found, to his surprise, that he could just then bear to let the shadows go, with astonishingly little pain. The station and wealth that he had called his own half an hour ago, had not taken any very strong hold on him during the short time he had enjoyed them; they had always seemed more or less alien to his true life; and he had even occasionally looked back with regret to the self-chosen career on which he had once entered with such high hopes, and such a joyful sense of independence. As for the promised wife who had come to him with the rank and wealth—he had suffered so much a few minutes ago from the thought of marrying her, while the discovery of the deceit was rankling in his mind, that the prospect of release from an engagement entered into on false pretences, could only appear in the light of a reprieve from misery, to both of them. As long as he could give Alma what she had longed for, he would have felt bound to

keep his word to her. He had loved her deeply once, however thoroughly he, just now, felt disabused of his love, and he would not have disappointed her and shamed her before the world, while he could give what she valued so highly as to sell her truth for it. But now that all the glamour had vanished like a puff of wind, what injustice could there be in reclaiming what she had never truly taken, what she had once turned away from, with indifference, if not with contempt.

It was well, Wynyard thought, that the path before him was so plain; if he had learned nothing of the news contained in Ralph's and Katherine Moore's letters, how his heart would have bled for Alma to-night. He would have known even so, that the collapse of his greatness would have been a severer blow to her than to himself, but he would not on that account have given her up.

The burden of decision would then have remained with her; she would have had to make up her mind whether to marry him in his changed circumstances, or to bear the onus of breaking an engagement a few days before marriage. Wynyard did not for a moment doubt which way her true wishes would turn, or that if, swayed by considerations of the moment, she had married him, the result would have been an unhappy one, a life of discontent, possibly of bitterness, for them both. It was well that he had it in his power to save her and himself from such a contingency; to tell her that he was aware of the false assumption under which the engagement had been entered upon, and that since she had accepted an earl, he held her free from any tie to Wynyard Anstice.

So far, the immediate future was a little plainer than it might have been; yet how he wished those eight months really had been dream months, that he could wake up and find himself situated precisely as he had been on that soft summer evening, when the scent of the May roses and the orange-blossoms had filled the air, and Emmie West's eyes had betrayed to him her confiding innocent love.

A growing chill in the air roused him at last to a perception of the length of time he had spent in these musings. The last rose-tint had passed from the mountains, and all the valleys lay in deep shadow

when he began his walk home, and with the renewed energy that came with motion, came also a keener sense of pain, a more vivid realisation of all that was involved for himself and others in the news he had just learned. No, the situation, as it was eight months ago, was far from being restored. Poor Ralph! poor Christabel Moore! whose pale face dawned back upon his memory, sweet and wan, like the crescent moon beginning to show a wintry splendour in the sky; poor Christabel Anstice, who had slipped away without giving him an opportunity of fulfilling her husband's last request in her favour! Might not her fate have been different, if she had known of that letter which ought to have reached him eight months ago? It would certainly have been different with him, he would have escaped much mortification and embarrassment in the career on which he was now thrown back, and which he certainly should not be able to take up, at the point where he had left it. Above all, he would not have had the galling sense of having been deceived and made a dupe of, which would always embitter his memory and rankle in his mind. It was hard to forgive, even though it was Christmas Day, and the fête lights were only now being put out on the altars of the little church below, and the canticles he had heard in the morning, "Goodwill and peace," "Peace and goodwill," kept striving to make themselves heard through the angry tumult of his thoughts. Eight months ago he had suffered, indeed, he had been disenchanted of first hopes and first love, but not beyond power of renewal; there had still been breaths of spring to which his heart could open. He had then been free, at least, from the deep distrust of others and the self-contempt that threatened him now.

The bank covered with cactus-leaves, jagged and flowerless, with the bare pomegranate-hedge above, caught his eye as he passed, and brought a stinging recollection of the early desolate days, when it had first photographed itself on his memory. All the discontents and disappointments of his life rose up and threatened to overwhelm him with bitterness in that dark hour. If Emmie had suffered she was avenged. Then came back a recollection of the look of victory and peace on her face

which he felt put her as far above him as Alma had sunk below, in his esteem. His eyes were opened, but only to his own discomfiture, and to a sense of loss and shame, which looked as if it would be endless. Yes, it was hard to forgive; it was winter in the landscape and winter in his heart, as he strode down the hill and through the silent village to the magnolia terrace, where the trees looked dark and almost funereal in the faint moonlight.

It was not till he was close upon home that he remembered the cairngorm brooch, which he ought to have given to Madame Antoine Barbou, that afternoon, and if there had been any hope of finding the good people of the valley awake at that hour, he would willingly have retraced his steps the whole way, to remedy his forgetfulness, so distasteful did the idea of going indoors and facing Madame de Florimel appear to him at the moment.

CHAPTER XLI.

FAREWELL.

Farewell! a long farewell to all my greatness.

Take, O take those lips away
That so sweetly were forsworn,
And those eyes, the break of day,
Lights that do mislead the morn :
But my kisses bring again,
Bring again—
Seals of love, but seal'd in vain,
Seal'd in vain!

MADAME DE FLORIMEL was accustomed to make something of a ceremony of her Christmas dinner, even when she had to eat it alone, and the prospect of sharing it this year with an English guest and a relation, had given zest to her preparations. The turkey, fattened under her own directions, the plum-pudding concocted under her own eyes, the relics of family plate from the old mansion at Leigh, which had accompanied her to La Roquette, and been aired only on great occasions since—all had been duly ordered and arranged, and madame's anxiety for Wynyard's return arose as much from care for the well-being of the dinner, as from curiosity about the cause of

his long absence. When he made his appearance at last, and she saw by her first glance at his face that whatever might be the news he had to tell, it was something that had moved him deeply and would require a great deal of talking about, she was ready to fall in with his suggestion that they should adjourn to the dining-room at once, and eat their meal in peace, before any questions were asked. As the dinner went on, Wynyard fell more and more kindly into the spirit of the entertainment. Madame de Florimel had too much tact to make any allusion to his own affairs, and the talk about hers in which he forced himself to take part—the praises of Joseph Marie, the village gossip, the little everyday incidents of the quiet routine life which she found sufficient for her happiness, made precisely the sort of talk that was most soothing at the moment, and helped him, better than anything else could have done, to struggle out of the bitter mood into which he had fallen. Here was someone whose life had been marred by deeper disappointments and infidelities than he had experienced, and who had contrived to keep a fresh, youthful heart and kindly faith through all. Here was the evidence of victory over pain, of sweet drawn from bitter, that ought to shame a fainting heart into courage. So, at least, Wynyard felt, looking across the dinner-table in the shabby, half-furnished *salle à manger*, towards Madame de Florimel's spirited old face, as she held up her glass to him and drank goodwill and prosperity to her neighbours, to their olive-grounds, and vineyards, and poultry-yards, in a bumper of her own wine.

When they returned to the salon, Wynyard put a fresh log on the fire, drew madame's chair in front of it, and taking his seat beside her began cheerfully enough: "Well, madame, let us hope your lawyer, whoever he may be, is skilful enough to make successive alterations in your will, without leaving it a trap for future litigation, for I believe you will have to add a new clause, rescinding your late disposition of *Terres Blanches*, and returning to your first intention after all. That, at least, is what I think will be the effect on you, of the news *La Fermière* turned out of her cork drawer this afternoon."

Madame de Florimel took a long considering look in his face before she spoke. "So," she said slowly, at last, "that is it, then. Ralph is not dead, and has sent news of himself after all. I have had conjectures of the sort all along, and never been able to feel that you, my poor Wynyard, were really Lord Anstice. A disappearance of a year or two, and a sudden return, would be just what one might have expected of Ralph, the sort of practical joke he would like to play upon us all."

"No, no, nothing so dramatic; you forget that the letter was eight months old; nothing so good as dear old Ralph's coming back, only a miserable little posthumous heir, who will keep us all in suspense and anxiety for the next twenty-one years, and never be worth half as much as his father after all. Not so pleasant at all events. There, read Ralph's letter first, and then this one, and tell me what you think of it."

Madame de Florimel interspersed her reading with many half-articulate exclamations of surprise, pity, and indignation, but when she had finished, she refolded the sheets, and, returning them to Wynyard in silence, sat looking at the fire, for once too much overwhelmed with disappointment to express it with her usual volubility.

Wynyard laid his hand over the soft finely-wrinkled fingers that lay, half-hidden by her lace-mittens, on her knee, and said: "Cheer up, madame, things are not so bad as might be, when one comes to look at them. There will be a long minority, remember, and you are the nearest, no, the only female relation on our side. You will have to come to England and educate that baby; and only consider the good you and Joseph Marie might do, during twenty-one years' reign at Leigh! The secrets of husbandry and management you will impart to the ignorant tenant-farmers on the estate and their still more ignorant wives—it will be something to live for."

"Wynyard, don't!"

"My dear madame, you must do me the justice not to be too compassionate over me. If two experiences of the changes in public favour that follow such marked vicissitudes of fortune, don't embitter me into a misanthrope, I really think I ought to be a great man."

"I was not thinking of you; you would not let me

congratulate you, and I am not going to condole with you. It is not as if Leigh had remained just as I knew it, before it was vulgarised by my poor cousin's wealth, and the habits and tastes he brought there with him, from his old associations. I have never coveted the position, as he had made it for you. You, by yourself, will do quite as well, and be of as much real consequence in the world, with *Terres Blanches*. But—poor Miss Rivers !”

Wynyard winced, and a bitter smile came on his face.

“Yes ; you do well to pity her ; you understand her well, I see, better than I did. She is to be pitied, since a chance of being made a countess does not come, even to such a beauty as Miss Rivers, every day. Yet there is some consolation for her too, in the way things have fallen out ; the news might have come a week after, instead of a week before, the wedding ; and, as it is, the game will not be altogether up for her. She must resign Leigh, since its present possessor is only a week old ; but there are other fine places in the world, and I have no doubt, if she goes the right way to work, she will have Mr. Horace Kirkman, with *Golden Mount* in his gift, at her feet again, long before another year is out.”

Madame de Florimel turned from the fire to look him full in the face ; and, as he met her keen inquiring eyes, he felt sorry for the bitterness with which he had spoken. He had not meant to betray his discovery of Alma's purpose in hiding the letters to anyone, least of all to Madame de Florimel, who was sure to be eager enough in following out any hints to her disparagement, and already had the clue in her hand. While he sat thinking what he could say to soften the effect of his hasty outburst, Madame de Florimel showed him that his remorse was needless, since her surprise was caused by nothing else than finding him as well informed as herself. She got up, took a little slip of paper from the ledge on the high carved mantelshelf, where it had been carefully deposited, unfolded it, and held it before his eyes.

“I have been hesitating all this afternoon whether to show you this or not ; but now I have no doubt that you had better read and have your eyes opened. It is the half-sheet of note-paper that was found with the letters

in the cork drawer. You are too quick to miss its meaning, so I will spare you my comments,—read and understand, that I may not be obliged to put into words what it has told me.”

“I should so like one of us to be quite happy.

“Your affectionate sister,

“CONSTANCE FORREST.”

Wynyard read the sentence on the paper aloud, with a sob in his voice. Madame de Florimel drew her chair a little closer to him.

“Quite happy,” she said; “that is rich, and a countess, with a man for whom she could feel a degree of affection, on other accounts. Wynyard, don’t be too sorry that you cannot give her the perfect happiness she looked for, when she accepted you. It would not have lasted, believe me, even for her, and I cannot imagine you even tolerably content in a marriage entered into with such views. You would have found out which part of the bargain was held of most account by your wife, sooner or later, and—you are an Anstice like myself—don’t I know how hard it would have gone with you; better live alone, if indeed there should be any necessity for living alone, than with someone you are continually tempted to despise!”

“A million times better,” Wynyard answered. “Don’t be afraid, madame, we are quite in accord about what has to be done. There will be no wedding for me on New Year’s Day. I had made up my mind about that before I left the pine wood above Terres Blanches this afternoon. No; do not take the tell-tale paper out of my hand; it is neither yours nor mine. I shall restore it to its rightful owner to-morrow, and let it once more tell its own story. It will again save words that had better not be spoken.”

“You must not see her, Wynyard; take my advice as you would a mother’s. I have had sorrowful experience enough in my life, and have learnt this one thing at least, that when two people who have loved each other are finally disenchanted, there is nothing so effectual to intensify their pain as meeting to talk about it. If,

as is often the case, a good deal of surface emotion is called forth, and a kind of reconciliation patched up, which yet can never put things on the old footing, what is that, but a miserable lengthening out of the struggle, and an intensification of bitterness in the final rupture when it comes? On the other hand, if you confront each other only to show how hopelessly the old love is dead, you have given a stab to past recollections, that you will regret more and more as years pass on. Believe one who has suffered from such interviews, and spare yourself and her all you can. Write to her instead of meeting her at San Remo to-morrow, and enclose the letters that have lain so long in Madame Dallon's bureau-drawer. Miss Rivers must surely sometimes have had a little curiosity about them, since she put them away there. She deserves to have it satisfied after eight months of suspense."

"Don't be sarcastic, madame, it does not become you, after all those good wishes to your neighbours on Christmas evening. Yes, you are right—we shall not meet—I will send her the letters with this strip of paper between them, just as Madame Dallon gave them to me. An hour or two ago I felt as if I should like to confront and shame her; but now—*pax!*—it is enough, there is sufficient mortification before her without that. I will go back to Leigh, and see if there is yet time to arrange for poor little Countess Anstice to have her last wish, and lie in our dreary mausoleum beside her husband of a month. That's about the only thing I can do to fulfil poor Ralph's request, and it will be well to begin at once, by putting things on a right footing; so you see it will be a funeral instead of a wedding that we Anstices shall begin the year with. Our white days are not to be yet; let us talk about other people's white days. Was it Bertrand *fils* or Merle *père*, who you said was going to buy that little piece of ground of me below the bosquet, and build a *maisonnette* upon it?"

They tried, both of them, to bring the conversation back to La Roquette interests, and to discuss them as earnestly as they had done a little while ago; but the effort was too great, their hearts were too full, and by degrees the talk glided into more natural channels: the changed aspect of affairs at Leigh; Wynyard's own

prospects in the future; the young, dead mother, whom Wynyard, in obedience to Ralph's last wish, tried hard to defend against Madame de Florimel's indignation; the baby-heir and his aunt, whose letter, on second perusal, Madame de Florimel approved, and whom she already began to look upon with interest, as joint guardian and educator, with herself, of the future head of the house of Anstice. The well-built-up logs of the wood fire blazed and fell apart, and smouldered into white ashes, while these topics followed one another, till at last the Louis Quatorze clock on the chimney-piece chimed an hour that quite startled and scandalised Madame de Florimel. Its midnight chimes had probably not been heard previously by mortal ears for a generation back.

CHAPTER XLII.

CHRISTMAS EVE.

Was sucht ihr, mächtig und gelind,
Ihr Himmelstone, mich am Staube?
Klingt dort umher, wo weiche Menschen sind,
Die Botschaft hör' ich wohl, allein mir fehlt die glauhe.

"Is that really the bridal wreath that Madame Elise sent for you to wear in September, Alma? I should not have thought it possible that lying by, carefully packed in a box for three months, could have made it look so *passée*, and the lace puffings on the dress—— Ward may say what she likes, but I can't help suspecting that trimmings are worn a shade higher now. Turn round again, Alma, and let me look at you from the other side."

Lady Rivers was lying on a couch before a wood fire, in her dressing-room, at San Remo, and Alma stood before her, crowned and veiled, with the light of two lamps judiciously disposed on opposite stands, falling on the dazzling white folds of her bridal dress.

Ward, who had just disinterred the wedding paraphernalia from a box, where she had bestowed them the day when the news of Frank's death had arrived, was kneeling at Alma's feet, drawing out the long train and

the lace puffings, in an anxious effort to smooth away some creases that disgraced her skill as a packer; and two or three of the women-servants of the hotel, who had scented the trying-on of bridal finery, were standing near the door, holding up their hands in admiration of the stately effect made by Alma's tall, white-robed figure and veiled head, as seen from behind. The face was turned towards her mother's couch, and, to judge by its effect on Lady Rivers, could not have been so satisfactory.

"It's very distressing," that lady resumed, after a lengthened gaze, "and I'm sure I don't know what to do. When Mrs. Stanar's daughter went out to be married in India, and took her wedding dress with her, I condoled with her mother on the mortification she must feel at the idea of her daughter being married in a dress that had been turned out of the milliner's hands three months before, but I little thought then of experiencing a similar inconvenience in my own family. I really can't compliment you, Alma; I don't know whether it's the wreath or the height of the trimmings, but there is a something, a want of freshness in the general effect, that disappoints me sadly."

"Let us hope that Lord Anstice will not be so critical," Alma answered, in a somewhat weary tone. "I doubt whether he will notice it; freshness is, perhaps, hardly the effect he will look for in me, at my wedding."

"What nonsense, Alma, as if a waiting of three months would make any difference in you, at your age. I can't think what has made you take to saying such self-depreciatory things. If the season were a little further advanced, now, if it were February instead of December, we might have made you a wreath of real orange-blossom, and looped up the lace in front with sprays of natural flowers, just to give a different character to the dress. I hate going back to old things."

"I don't think you are singular there, mamma," said Alma; "a great many people find it unsatisfactory I fancy. I begin to doubt whether it ever answers. However, I hardly think that waiting till February for the real orange-blossom would answer in my case."

"We might get the blossoms even now, if we took a

little pains about it," Lady Rivers continued, in a ruminating tone, without noticing Alma's interruption. "I remember Emmie West talked of making a natural wreath for a girl at La Roquette, who was going to be married, and I can't help thinking that one of the kind would suit you better than that crushed artificial thing of Madame Elise's. You don't know how large and fine the sprays of orange-blossom are, one can get here."

Yes, Alma did know. As her mother spoke, the exact shape and size of a spray of orange-blossom came back to her memory. She saw it lying in the sunshine, on the garden-path of La Roquette, and herself coming down the steps from the maisonnette, picking it up and inhaling its fragrance, while the *facteur* was still on his way down the road, his letter-bag on his back; the spray that Emmie West was to have worn, if Uncle West had not died so opportunely, and she had not come to La Roquette just in time to stand on those steps and take in the letters on that particular morning. She had never voluntarily inhaled the scent of orange-flowers since. Wynyard would give her a bouquet of them next week, but she need not keep it in her hand more than a few minutes, or multiply the odour about her person more than could be helped.

"No, no," she said impatiently, "real flowers never do suit me, they always die directly I put them on. I am too artificial a person for anything but Madame Elise's performances. Ward and I will try to remodel this one so as to satisfy you before the day comes, if it does come."

"Of course it will come, next week. You had a telegram from Paris to announce Wynyard's arrival there, and he will be at La Roquette to-night. What can you mean, Alma?"

"Not much, perhaps," said Alma, "only that I am tired of standing up in my finery, between the lamps and the wood fire. I am sorry you don't like me, mother," she added in a softer tone, stooping down towards the couch to kiss Lady Rivers's hectic cheek; "I hoped I was giving you a pleasure on Christmas Eve by consenting to be dressed up for you to see."

Lady Rivers's face took a piteous expression, and she threw her arms round her daughter and clung to her with a caressing, dependent clasp, such as Alma had never known from her before. "Oh, my dear, I know I ought to be satisfied," she whispered, sobbing, "I know it ought to be a proud day, and a happy one, to me, when I see you dressed up for such a marriage as you are going to make. If anyone had told me, a year ago, that things would end for you as they are ending, that you would marry a man we can all of us like, your father and all, who was also as rich and in as good a position as Wynyard is now, I should have looked forward to it as a great triumph, a great happiness. Oh, Alma, is it not hard on me that I can't be happy to-day, that events should have fallen out to shake me so and make me feel so nervous, that I can't look forward to your wedding, and feel proud and happy about it, even when you stand before me in your bride's dress? Don't start away from me, Alma, and leave me just when, for once, I want you to comfort me."

"I'm only going to send Ward to the next room," Alma answered; "let me go for one minute, mamma, and I will come back to you."

She knew the sort of talk she had to expect, and she was glad of a minute's respite, to steady her nerves and steel her heart against the pain it would give her.

Lady Rivers was wiping away a few tears when Alma returned.

"It makes life such a very perplexing thing," she began, "that one can't look forward and see a little what is going to happen; one would sometimes act so very differently if one could foresee. This time last year, for example, when Mrs. Kirkman first spoke to me about Horace and you, if I could but have known that, before Christmas came round again, Wynyard would be an earl, and owner of the great Leigh estate, what a difference it would have made in my feelings. That brings me to the question I want to ask you, Alma. When Wynyard was with us in London, after we heard of poor Frank's death, he was so kind to me that I used to think sometimes he could never have noticed the little slights—you know what I mean, Alma—the time when my duty to you

obliged me to keep him at a distance, and perhaps to be a little inhospitable and rude sometimes. Do you know what he feels about all that now? Do you suppose he remembers it and thinks about it still?"

"He will never show that he thinks about it, you may depend upon that, mamma," said Alma, in a hard voice; "he will always be very kind to all of us, whatever he thinks."

"And that is the great thing," answered Lady Rivers, reassured. "I should not like to have another son-in-law who fancied he had a grudge against me, or to see another of my daughters afraid of her husband. Wynyard is your own choice, Alma, the man you have always loved; you can never cast it in my teeth that I persuaded you to take him, as poor Constance does, most unjustly, in speaking of Sir John. Of course it would have been as well if we could have always kept on friendly terms with him; but, after all, Wynyard is a sensible man, your father says so, and he will perhaps not blame me in his heart for not treating him as if he were a desirable match at a time when he was most undesirable. He will understand my conduct."

"Yes, he understands it."

"I am aware that all men over-value themselves, but he cannot think so highly of himself, can he, as to expect a mother who has her daughter's true interest at heart, to feel towards him while he was a poor barrister as she would naturally feel when his fortune changed? You might put it to him in that light if he should ever speak to you, Alma, on the subject of my past treatment of him."

"But he never will speak on that subject to me, mamma."

"Ah! but you don't know, my dear. If there is anything unpleasant a man can bring up to his wife after they are married, he is nearly sure, sooner or later, to find occasion to do it; and so, as I said before, I wish we could have foreseen what was to happen. People one thought one had got rid of, do seem to have such a knack of turning up again when one can least put up with them."

"Yes, mamma."

"You know what I am thinking of, Alma; you don't like me to refer to it, but I shall have no one to talk to when you are gone; and oh! my dear, I don't think I ever shall be able quite to put out of my mind the shock I felt at Monaco when we went to look at the gambling, and Horace Kirkman suddenly started up from the table at which Constance and young Lawrence had just sat down; the contemptuous way in which he pushed through our party, and the look he gave you in going out—quite savage. Whatever you say, I shall always believe that it was, somehow or other, through him those wicked reports reached Sir John, that made him forbid poor Constance to stay on with us here, till after your wedding."

"There is so little likelihood of the two coming across each other now."

"You don't know that, Alma. The Kirkmans are making their way everywhere, and are being taken up by all sorts of people—the very best. They are not refined, I never thought they were. I have more discernment than to think so, but then they are immensely wealthy, and it tells, you see, with the very best people. We were, perhaps, early in the field, but, looking at things as they were a year ago, I really can't see that we did anything wrong, however much I may regret that I did not foresee what was going to happen to Wynyard Anstice."

Alma was silent; it seemed useless to begin pointing out the discrepancies between these regrets and any view of the subject that Wynyard might be supposed to take. Indeed, what could she say to her mother that would not still more forcibly hit herself, and she thought she did not need to put the deeper causes for regret into words, to make herself feel them. Luckily Ward was impatient to begin the business of taking off and refolding the wedding-dress, and now put her head out of the inner room to remark that the hour for the table d'hôte was close at hand, and that there was hardly time left for Miss Rivers to change her dress before Sir Francis would come to take her down to dinner.

It was late when Alma came upstairs again. Lady Rivers had gone to bed and was asleep, and as Sir

Francis had fallen in with a congenial companion below, she had their sitting-room to herself for the rest of the evening—a lonely Christmas Eve, in sharp contrast with past Christmas Eves, and with the way in which other people were passing the season. Yet there was nothing in such solitude that should have depressed a happy bride-elect, with a telegram in her possession to say that her bridegroom was on his way to join her, and would be with her the day after to-morrow. Alma chided herself for her gloom, and then took up Wynyard's last letter, written from Longhurst, and read it over again, while a soft wind, blowing through the open window, brought in the scent of the climbing roses round the balcony, and made the light of her lamp flicker on the page. These surroundings made her feel very remote from Longhurst, with its chilly dark rooms and windy avenues, as Wynyard described them; remote in feeling, too, from him, when, in reading on and on, she caught the tone that coloured his descriptions and ran through all his thoughts about the place—such tender, regretful looking back to past days, so much dwelling, with anxious loyalty, on the old links between them; it was hardly being loved at all, Alma told herself bitterly, to owe all her lover's tenderness to recollections of the past. One could not live on past devotion any more than one could be warmed by last year's sunshine. And the case was so different with herself. There had been coldness, there had been pain since their reunion, but her love had been growing amid all the pain, gradually changing its character and its standpoint, through the self-humiliation that the knowledge of her fault had brought upon her. She had altogether abandoned the critical attitude, in which she had half distrusted, half admired, all in him that was higher in conduct, or in thought than the standard to which she had been accustomed; but could she ever let him see this? Could she show him how her love had deepened and strengthened, while the depressing persuasion grew upon her that she was lessened in his estimation, that his old tenderness was chilled into something hardly warmer than indulgent pity and regret for what had been? It was hard, Alma thought, to have lost so much

just when she seemed to have gained all; but men—or fate was it—did seem to be very hard on any vacillation or doubtfulness. Was it any use to go back and try to take up a love you had once chilled or wounded? Was complete forgiveness, complete healing possible? Did you not most often, when you tried to take it back again, find it dead or changed into something unfamiliar—something in which, perhaps, all the old worth was transmuted into evil? Then her thoughts flew off to Constance, for whose fate her heart was now always aching. How lightly she had thrown away her early love, and now how the longing to be loved was revenging itself upon her; now when the love, once so innocent and tender, had turned into a terror, a guilt that yet had a fascination for her, from which her better self and the entreaties of her friends had hardly power to drag her back. What a struggle it had been and might again be! A struggle in which victory could only partially restore self-respect. Alma groaned in spirit, recalling looks, and words, and tones of voice that must always, she thought, dwell in Constance's memory, like a blot, or a stain, growing darker and more painful to look upon, in proportion as her vision cleared through repentance, and her sense of duty grew stronger. How was it that Constance did not perceive the different quality of the love which haunted her now that there was no longer respect, or tenderness, or even pity in it, that it was but the dark shadow of what she had cast from her when it was worth having. Ah! was it possible for slighted love to come back whole-hearted and pure, with the aura of tender, ideal worship, that had breathed about it before its trust had been betrayed, its divinity dragged in the dust? Was there ever, under the best circumstances, any use in going back?

It was not the first time that Alma had wasted minutes and hours in questions and misgivings like these. The habit had grown upon her since Constance's visit, and to-night, with Wynyard's letter from Longhurst in her hand, and the knowledge that he was now on his way to La Roquette in her mind, they came with fresh force and claimed the solitary hours as all their own. She had almost forgotten that it was Christmas Eve, till in the

midst of her bitter musings the sound of bells chiming from the churches in the town reached her through the open window, and she recalled the talk there had been at the table d'hôte that day about the midnight services that were to take place to-night.

Alma had refused to go to one; when someone asked her, she did not like the thought of making a spectacle of a service because it was in a foreign church, but now a great yearning to be one among the crowds approaching the lighted altars came over her. If she could have gone unknown and lost herself among a crowd of poor people, who were coming with simple-hearted believing joy, to welcome the birth into the world of *that* love which, continually slighted, forgives continually, and offers from its very wounds, healing for its outrages; if she could have caught the contagion of their hope, by kneeling with them and forgetting herself for a little while, what a rest it would have been!

Then, moved by an impulse such as she had never experienced before, Alma sank on her knees by the chair on which she had been sitting and hid her face, weeping. The midnight chimes reached her ears as she knelt, and by-and-by the tolling of a bell in a near church, that told that the central moment of the service had come, and that everywhere throughout France, throughout Christendom, heads were bowed and hearts lifted up in joyful yearning. Oh! to feel it for a moment; yes, there was such a love, if only her doubting heart could turn to it and find rest. The love that, slighted, comes near and offers itself still, that stands at the door and knocks until eventide, that can cover a multitude of sins against itself, and remember them no more.

For the first time in her life Alma saw it as the supreme good; her soul rose for a little while out of the mists of doubt and worldliness, and, in the light that came to her then, she saw, as she had never seen before, the nature of her errors, and knew against Whom she had sinned, when she had paltered with her own heart and other hearts for the sake of wealth and worldly ambition. She recalled the expression of Horace Kirkman's face at their last unexpected meeting, and felt utterly self-condemned. Had she, by her selfish conduct towards him

robbed him of the one chance of rising to better things which a sincere love might have brought him? If all his future career were marked by self-seeking, and he never again knew anything of love but its most selfish instincts, would not she be answerable for this, who had disabused him of any dawning ideal of disinterestedness and purity which he might have associated with the object of his first love? Could there be a future of honour and love and heart satisfaction for her who had wrought this?

For a moment or two Alma was ready to pronounce against herself, and almost to wish that something might come to snatch from her the fruits of her wrong doing, for just then no doom seemed so dreadful as the being left to possess them. It was but a momentary impulse, and her lips refused to translate it into the words of prayer that half rose in her mind; her ordinary mood returned even while she knelt, yet the better thought had been there, a ray of divine light had pierced the clouds of her self-will, and an infinite help and comfort lay for her in that recollection, in after times.

CHAPTER XLIII.

SERO SED SERIO.

Never any more
While I live

Can I hope to see his face, as before.

SIR FRANCIS had to all appearance quite recovered the shock of his son's death by the time he rejoined his family at San Remo; he had resumed all his old habits, during three months of full occupation in London, where he had been living by himself, and he was now as ready as he had ever been, in holiday times, to fight over again his old battles, legal or political, with anyone he fell in with, who was inclined for such mental exercise. He never spoke Frank's name now, either to his wife or to Alma, or alluded to the sorrow that, three months ago, had appeared to overwhelm him.

Perhaps Lady Rivers might have noticed, if it had been her way to notice what could not be complained of, that he listened more patiently than formerly to her talk

about her own health, and indulged in fewer sarcastic remarks at her expense. Alma, at all events, observed a difference in her father before he had been with them twenty-four hours. He talked as energetically as was his wont, and seemed as entirely absorbed in business interests; but she saw that there was more of effort in the energy and absorption than there used to be; it was a determined will, not a craving intellect, that now kept him busy, and, whenever he allowed himself to remit his exertions for awhile, the eager light in his face died out into a weary greyness that made him look many years older than he had done a few months ago. Alma's heart was very much moved towards her father when she noticed this change, for she admired his resolution to get what solace and spiritual nourishment he could, from his old sources of interest, and felt how much more sympathy she had with this attitude of mind, than with her mother's constant complaining.

She spent a great part of Christmas Day with her father, who, now that the parting was so near, seemed disposed to take her into a closer companionship than any one of his children had hitherto enjoyed. They went to church together in the morning, and in the afternoon had a long solitary walk on the shore, while the level golden light lay over the sea, and the waves broke on their unchanging shore-line with gentle ripples that matched the mild air and the bright lines of the gardens overhanging the beach. The contrast between this and other Christmas afternoon walks at Longhurst was strong in their minds, but there was a careful avoidance, on both sides, of painful subjects. Sir Francis talked with resolute cheerfulness on one topic of family interest after another; the advantages of having Longhurst off their hands, the tolerably good appointment secured for Melville, the leisure which his solitude this winter afforded for taking up some long-abandoned studies, and his good luck in still feeling something of the charm these had had for him in early years, when he was a struggling man, and found study a refuge from pinching anxiety and the bitterness of deferred hopes; he was lucky indeed to be able to turn to them now with some remnant of the old zest—after all.

They were standing still watching the sunset when Sir Francis said this, and Alma, glancing at her father's face in a short silence that followed, saw again the grey weariness she had noticed before, overspreading it, and thoughts he did not utter, found an echo in her mind. After all—all his successes, all his triumphs, to be thankful above all things for the power of taking an interest still in the old relaxations; had his splendid career brought him no greater satisfaction than that? "Ah! well," Sir Francis muttered, "it's a great thing to have such a resource to turn to, when one gets hipped; but how poor West used to sneer at me when we were young for giving my time to such unprofitable speculations! Poor fellow, he was full then of a very different sort of speculations, and a poor thing he made of them in the end. Not that I would crow over him, as having done so much better with my life than he with his, after all. Who knows? When one gets to the end, I suppose it all looks pretty much the same,—at least as to the more or less pudding and praise one has laid hold of. Poor West, he and I spent some pleasant days together when we were boys. I wish he had not grown so cantankerous with his reverses, or that your mother had managed matters so that our families need not have stood so far apart in later times. You must see what you can do for Emmie, Alma, when you are Countess Anstice. I don't like to think of that nice little thing wearing out her best days as nursery governess to one of the Kirkmans. You might have her to live with you at Leigh, by-and-by."

"She is very happy where she is, papa," said Alma, "she has written a very cheerful letter to mamma lately, which I will show you when we go in."

Emmie West's name did not sound very pleasantly to Alma's ears on that day, when she knew that Wynyard was at La Roquette in close proximity to the hidden letters, and surrounded by sights that must bring Emmie and the spring of his sojourn there to his memory. To-morrow the danger would be over, and Wynyard by her side, not to leave her again; and after that, Alma thought that she should feel quite generously towards Emmie, and not allow herself another jealous thought ever again. The

time of suspense and danger was lessening minute by minute, even while these thoughts were rankling in her heart; there went the last rim of the sun below the purple mountains, and now there was nothing further to look for, but the lighting up of the red after-glow and its duskiest reflection overspreading the darkening sea. Alma slipped her hand under her father's arm, and they climbed the steep path to the hotel in silence; but when they had reached their own suite of apartments, and Alma was about to leave him to take off her outdoor dress, Sir Francis surprised her very much by drawing her close to him, and giving her, what it was very much against his wont to bestow, an uncalled-for kiss.

"You are happy, are you not, my child?" he said, still holding her fast and looking wistfully in her face, "there is no drawback to your happiness? Nay, 'tis a foolish question, but humour your father to-night; let me have it from your own lips that all is well with you, that you are following your own wishes with an assured prospect of content. I was negligent about Constance, and I cannot afford to make another mistake. Tell me it is only a girl's natural sorrow at bidding good-bye to her old life that makes you look so sad to-day. There is nothing else on your mind—no drawback or misgiving? I may be quite happy about you, my Alma, may I not?"

Oh! if she dared but have told him all, and given a pledge of future truthfulness by taking counsel with her father to-night; but it was too foreign to all old habits and family traditions to talk of feelings to him. She could not bring herself, all in a minute, to take such an unheard-of step, and while she hesitated, a distressed look came into her face, and she saw the answering disappointment in her father's; he bent and kissed her again, and then let go his hold on her hands.

"Well, my dear, never mind, I have only startled and distressed you I see; run away to your mother, and get ready for dinner."

Alma went into the inner suite of rooms to find Ward busied, under her mother's directions, in choosing the prettiest of her evening dresses for her to wear to-night. There would be a larger party than usual at dinner this

evening, and everyone would be looking at the young English bride-elect, who was to be made a countess in a day or two; it was time for her to throw off something of the plainness of attire that their period of mourning had imposed on her hitherto, and shine out in anticipation of the glory that was to be.

Strange to say, Alma's spirits and self-confidence rose under the business of dressing, and when she turned to the glass, before leaving the room, the radiant figure that looked out from its depths seemed to give her reassuring glances, and to chide her for her depression and her fears. The exhilaration carried her triumphantly through the rest of the evening, drowning anxiety, and restoring her charm of manner and that happy consciousness of power to please, which had somewhat deserted her since she had had cause to be displeased with herself.

The company that night comprised some foreigners of rank and English visitors to San Remo, old acquaintance of the Riverses, who were interested in Alma's prospects, and glad to see her come out of the eclipse into which the gloom of the family bereavement had cast her of late. They gathered round her in the evening with congratulations and sympathetic curiosity about the ceremony fixed for New Year's Day, and for a few hours while Wynyard and Madame de Florimel were having their lengthy talk over the dying firebrands in the salon at La Roquette, Alma's sceptre of power seemed to be given back to her, and she became once more the brilliant society queen, who had dazzled Mr. Kirkman into coveting her for a daughter-in-law, a year ago, at Golden Mount. Her father, seeing the homage paid to her, and observing the brilliancy of her smile and the light in her eyes, felt happy and satisfied in all that concerned her, pleasing himself with the thought that at least one of his children would profit by the position to which his hard work had raised them, and reward his labours by giving him the spectacle of a happy, prosperous life, in which his old age would have a share.

During *déjeuner* the next morning, Alma made an engagement to join a riding-party who had planned a distant excursion, and would not return to the hotel till a little before sunset. The early post had not brought her

the note from Wynyard, fixing the hour of his arrival at San Remo, that she had hoped to receive, and she told herself that she should be able to meet him more easily and naturally, more as he would expect to be met, if she found him awaiting her on her return from her ride, than if she spent the long morning hours in looking out for him, and fretting herself with foolish conjectures about the cause of his detention at La Roquette, should he not appear at the earliest moment possible.

It was a gay party, and the ride in the exhilarating air had quite the effect Alma hoped in banishing anxious thoughts and making the hours fly swiftly. Then there were little delays, lingerings by some of the party to finish sketches at the place where they stopped for their mid-day rest, halts to watch the effects of changing lights and shadows on the snow-clad Alpine range in the distance, so that in spite of urgings from the more experienced members of the party, the sun set whilst they were still some miles from the town.

There could not possibly be any waiting for her now, Alma thought cheerfully, while the horses were urged to a brisk canter during the last half-hour. Suspense was virtually over; he would be there, most likely on the steps of the hotel, looking out for her. It would be the least formal greeting possible, for he would come forward to lift her from her horse, his arms would be round her before the glow of exercise had left her cheeks, and the thrill of joy would banish all misgivings, all self-questioning, all looking back, and make the future easy. While the rapid motion was bearing her joyfully nearer and nearer each minute to him, she would not allow herself to picture an expression on the face she should look down upon, as his arms clasped her, that would not bring complete satisfaction to her heart.

There were figures on the hotel-steps which Alma could not distinguish at the moment of drawing up before the door, but it was her father who came forward to lift her down.

"You are late," he said, "but no, don't look so penitent, no one has been waiting in a state of feverish impatience for your return. I went down to meet the train you mentioned as most likely, and had my walk for

nothing; however, I see there is a letter for you in the sitting-room, just arrived, which will no doubt explain the delay, and let you know when we may expect him."

"A note, or a letter?" Alma could not help asking, as she crossed the hall with her father. Sir Francis smiled playfully.

"I should think a note would do since you will see him so soon, but so far as my observation, which was not scrutinising, went, I should say it was a thick letter; but run on, my dear, as you are so curious—don't wait for me; stairs are nothing to you—run on to the salon."

Alma carried off the letter to her own room, and let Ward take off her riding-habit and put her into her ordinary evening dress, before she ventured to do more than glance at the outside. She even put it out of her hand, on the dressing-table, and would not, for those few minutes, allow herself to realise how thick it was, and that the envelope must almost certainly hold an enclosure. She always thought afterwards that she had not felt any surprise, but had known the worst of the news from the moment when her father told her there was a letter awaiting her; and yet this knowledge must certainly, somehow or other, have admitted hope, or else feeling was suspended for awhile, or she could not have spoken cheerfully to her mother through the open dressing-room door, and sent Ward away with a calm sentence when she had done with her.

At last she was alone—there was no further excuse for waiting; it must come, the sight that she now knew she had been expecting and dreading since May,—those letters, and whatever Wynyard might choose to say to her about them. Reasonably she knew of nothing that would connect her with them, or induce him to send them on to her, supposing him to have received them; it was only her conscience that spoke, and that so loudly that every other power of her mind was silenced. She could not think of probabilities; she knew that her punishment had come.

It was Wynyard's handwriting on the envelope, however, and before she broke the seal she raised the letter softly, as she had done once before with one of his, and laid it against her lips,—once more before she knew

for certain that he despised her. She had been used in old times, when looking at her name in his handwriting, to remember words he had spoken, long ago, foolish tender words, about how he felt while framing those letters—the spell they were to him—the thrills the sight of them called up, as they grew under his fingers. That *had* been, and she recalled it once more while the envelope touched her lips, and then she turned the letter round and broke the seal. She drew out two letters directed to Wynyard Anstice, Esq.; then a half-sheet of paper in Constance's handwriting, the sight of which gave her as keen a pain, as if the words which she read stupidly over and over again had been sharp instruments stabbing through her eyes and her brain to her heart; last came a letter from Wynyard to herself, which she opened after awhile, when an interval in her pain, a deadness stealing over her, gave her power to read.

“MY DEAR ALMA,

“You will naturally be very much surprised to get a letter from me to-day, instead of seeing me; but when you have read the two letters I herewith enclose, you will understand why, after much thought, I have determined rather to write than to come to you. After all we had hoped and planned, there must needs have been great pain and bitterness in words of farewell, spoken between you and me, and you will agree, I am sure, after reading these letters, that nothing but to exchange such words remains to us, and that the least painful way of getting them said had better be chosen. Dear Alma, since it is a farewell I am writing, I will not say a word of reproach to you for keeping back my cousin Ralph Anstice's letter from me last spring; or for letting me suppose that you were ignorant of his death, when we had our explanation by the river at Clelles, and that I was misinformed about the relations that actually existed between you and Horace Kirkman. Thinking of you still with a lingering of my old belief about you, I feel almost ready to beg your pardon for knowing what I know, and I have a strange reluctance to sending you the slip of your sister's letter which has explained to me and Madame de Florimel the riddle of your concealment of my letters; yet, in justice to myself, I must let

you know that I know all, and that if the letters I enclose had not contained the news they will in a few moments reveal to you, I should have found myself in a great dilemma, the dilemma of having to fulfil a promise made under a misconception of the circumstances that called it forth. As it is, the man you accepted as your future husband, no more exists than ever did the Alma whom I, Wynyard Anstice, then believed had been true to me through my adversity, and loved me enough to brave a struggling life at my side. Your misconception was, as you will see, even more complete than mine, and I suppose—painful as the writing of this letter is to me, and, as the reading of it will I fear be to you—we ought both to be thankful that events have so fallen out, as to show us, before it was too late, the unreality on which we were building our hopes. Had the news contained in the letters I enclose reached us a week after, instead of a week before, our proposed marriage, you would have had the mortification of finding that you had been betrayed by your own act into accepting the fate you wished to avoid—marriage with a poor man (for my position after nearly a year's idleness will be much worse than it was when I wrote to you last January), and I should have had the still worse pain of witnessing your disappointment, and learning the little power I, personally, had to console you for the loss of the position you had coveted. It would not have been well for either of us. However painful our present circumstances may be, let us both be thankful that we have escaped a life of mutual recrimination and discontent. That last sentence, as I read it over, a quarter of an hour or so after writing, sounds bitter; but believe me, dear Alma, I do not feel bitterly towards you, as I write the concluding sentences of my letter. Why should I? After all, why should I ever have expected so much love from you, that you should abandon, for my sake, what you have been taught to think the good of life? I have only my own folly and misunderstanding of your character to thank for my disappointment.

“You judged yourself more truly. You are made for the bright things and the prosperous high places of the world; and since I cannot give them to you myself, let me at least hope that they will come to you through

someone who will love you as well as I could have done, and make you as happy as I would fain have made you. Dear Alma, farewell. I go back to Leigh to-morrow, to carry out a request you will read in Miss Moore's letter, and I will write to your father fully from thence. Tell him as much or as little as you please of the circumstances which caused the delay of Ralph Anstice's letter in reaching me. I shall of course be silent on that part of the matter so long as I live. "WYNYARD ANSTICE."

The bewilderment caused by some sentences in this letter befriended Alma, so far as to shield her from feeling at once all the pain it was calculated to give her. She turned breathlessly for explanation to the enclosed letters, and found a further relief in reading them. Just for the first few moments after their perusal she could comfort herself by thinking that all might not be over, that he was giving her up mainly on account of the change in his circumstances, not because he was angry with her, and despised her for what she had done. This faint hope buoyed her up for a while, enabled her to speak cheerfully to her father when he summoned her to go down to dinner, and sustained her through the hour when it was absolutely necessary to keep up appearances, but minute by minute she felt that the hope she had fastened upon was melting in her grasp, and the bitter waters of despair from which she strove to drag herself away, were nearing and nearing, and must sooner or later go over her head. It is never at the first moment that an unexpected misfortune is felt in its full force. All its aspects of pain and mortification cannot be taken in at one glance; they present themselves usually one by one, each showing itself as a fresh foe to strike down the incredulities, or hopes, or old habits of thought, that the mind, in self-defence, at first opposes as barriers to the rising flood of woe. So it was with Alma through that evening. She found herself fighting point by point for one outpost of hope after another, from which she was ever driven back by a fresh aspect of the harm she had done, in keeping back the letters. At the end of her conflict she took a sudden resolution, without calculating the pain it would cost her to act upon it. She went to her father, as soon as she knew him to be alone, and told him the whole

story, beginning with her reading of Constance's letter in Madame de Florimel's store-room, and ending by placing Wynyard's letters, with the two enclosures, in his hands.

"I shall read in his face," she thought, "what hope there is for me. He is a man, with a man's way of understanding and looking at things; not a woman's. I shall read in his face what measure of condemnation my conduct merits in his opinion, and what degree of forgiveness and further affection he could mete out to one who had so offended against his sense of honour. He is not so strict, perhaps, and has not such a high idea of what a woman should be, as Wynyard has, but if he speaks as if I could be forgiven and loved again, I will hope."

Sir Francis was a person to whom it was not difficult to tell a painful story, for he had a habit of attentive listening; and he never interposed, but with a question that helped the narrator in his progress to the end of his confession. Neither were there any comments on what he heard, to be deciphered on his astute, listening face—no surprise or indignation—nothing but interest and anxiety to learn the exact truth was to be read there, till he had attained that end. This quiet, business-like manner of his carried Alma on, and caused her confession to be fuller than perhaps she could have made it to anyone else. She even spoke of her early doubts as to whether she could be happy with a man of so little worldly ambition as Wynyard, and confessed the coldness that had grown up between them since their engagement. When she ceased to speak there was a long pause, and Alma felt the arm which her father had put round her waist at the beginning of the interview slightly relax its hold; she heard a heavy sigh, and, looking up, saw that her father's head was turned away from her. He was thinking, now that he knew all, judging her, looking at everything all round, sorrowfully but quite calmly, weighing what excuses there might be, and summing up for or against her in his mind. When he spoke it would not be to reproach, or bitterly blame; it would be a calm sentence, but Alma felt it would have all her life's welfare in it, for it would be a verdict she would have no courage to appeal against. If her father found her conduct inexcusable, she would never go to any other man for pardon for it; she could never have faith enough, or

humility enough, for that. If Alma had known how much she would suffer during those moments of suspense, she would hardly have had courage to expose herself to such pain. Before her father spoke, she was ready to fall on her knees at his feet and beg him to break the silence, if only by an outburst of indignation against her. So terrible was it to her to watch the gradual settling of the lines of his face into hopelessness, and to hear repeated again and again the heavy sigh, which never came from him but when he was trying to bring his mind to contemplate a painful state of things for which he saw no remedy.

"You have told me everything?" he said at last.

"Yes, papa, everything. You think there is no hope for me?"

"I don't know exactly what hope you would have. You have read the letters, you know the state of mind he is in, and his circumstances now. No, Alma, I see what you are going to ask, but I cannot conscientiously do it for you. If, while he loved you and esteemed you, as I am afraid he never can again, you doubted whether you could endure poverty for his sake, how much less would you find it endurable, when the love and trust that were to have stood in the place of riches have been lessened by such an experience as this? It would not answer, my dear. You must trust me, and believe my experience. You have been brought up in a certain way, you have certain views and a certain character, and you can't, however much you may think it now, get rid of all that suddenly. If you were to marry Wynyard next week, as at this moment you wish to do, your former dislike to narrow circumstances—the differences between your views of life and his—would reappear in a little while. Even if you kept back the expression of them, there would always be the recollection of this thing between you to make him suspect you of ambition and discontent, and to make you divine suspicion in him whenever a difference of opinion cropped up. You don't believe this of yourself, but you see he does. It might easily come to be as he describes it—a life of mutual recrimination and discontent. You must not ask me to help you to such a lot as that, and you know your mother will not."

"If I were to tell him myself that, in spite of all, I had always loved him——?"

"But, my dear—I do not want to pain you, I am sorry enough for you, but the case is too serious for anything but perfect frankness—after what has passed—under the circumstances of your refusal and your acceptance, I don't see how you can say that you have always loved him, expecting him to believe it. There are limits to the degree of vacillation a man can bear generously. You must believe me, Alma, there is nothing for you now but to accept his decision in silence. I know it is hard when one finds one has made a great mistake not to try to rectify it, but sometimes submission to blame and loss one has brought on oneself is all that is left to one; the only course that has any dignity in it."

Then Sir Francis put the arm he had withdrawn round Alma's waist again, drew her close to him, and kissed her. There was pitying kindness, fatherly protection, but not the old, proud love in his caress. Alma felt the difference down to the bottom of her proud heart, and it decided her conduct. If it was bitter to be caressed by a father who was disappointed in her, how could she bear the caresses of a husband in whose esteem she had been lessened, and before whom she must continually humble herself?

She did not withdraw from her father's pitying embrace; she crept even a little closer to him, telling herself that this love, this clasp was the best, the closest that remained to her, all at least that she had power to take, for when her father's voice ceased while she sat silent with her head on his shoulder, another voice seemed to sound in her ear:

Life's light grows dim, let him never come back to us,
There would be doubt, hesitation, and pain.

She remembered the accents of Wynyard's voice as she had heard them in the sunshiny meadow at Clelles repeating these words, and they carried the conviction with them now, that she had forcibly put away from her then—it is the faithful heart that wins and keeps, but if one has not faith——

There had been a relenting in his tone whilst reading the last verse:

Pardoned in heaven, the first by the throne.

She remembered that also. Yes, there might come the peace of forgiveness and reconciliation sometime; but

for that she felt she must wait a weary while, and even that would not restore to her the love that she had lost.

"You will bear it bravely," Sir Francis said, kissing her again. "I am glad you told me the whole truth, Alma. We will never refer to it again, my dear, even between ourselves. There is no need for anyone else to hear more than that the sudden change in Wynyard's circumstances makes it impossible for him to marry. I am glad you told *me* the whole truth. You are the first of my children who has come to me frankly with the confession of a fault, and if it is any comfort to you to hear, my dear, I can tell you that the pleasure of having your confidence will go far to atone for the pain your story has caused me; I should have felt it keenly indeed had I heard it from any other than yourself." Then there was another and a warmer kiss, and at last Alma went away, more comforted by her father's kindness than she could have believed possible an hour ago. She had suffered so much during the last eight months from telling herself that the affection to which she was about to trust her whole life had been won on false pretences, and might collapse at any moment, that the certainty of possessing one love that had survived the knowledge of her fault, to which she could henceforth turn for full sympathy and understanding of her mental troubles and remorse, brought with it rest and peace that had in them a promise of healing.

The next day the Rivers family left the hotel at San Remo for Genoa without taking leave of any of their acquaintance. The wonder they left behind them grew more and more intense for a day or two, and then found its solution in paragraphs which began to appear in *Galignani*, copied from the London papers. The history of Lord Anstice's private marriage, and the birth of his heir, had by this time become public property, and furnished, as might be expected, a nine days' wonder to the lovers of fashionable gossip, and afforded welcome incident to fill up vacant corners of evening papers. Some of these lengthened out the narrative with comments on the conduct of the actual possessor of the title and estate, in resigning his honours without any effort to resist the unexpected claim upon them, and even went so far as to

give some particulars respecting the antecedents of the man who had borne the title of Lord Anstice during the last eight months; dwelling upon the cause of his quarrel with the old lord; his upright character, the promise of distinction which his short career at the bar and as a writer had held out; setting him forth, in fact, as the hero of a story which awakened a considerable amount of public interest and sympathy. Alma Rivers's name did not come into the public papers, to the great relief of her friends; but it was in everybody's mouth, as they read and talked, and much conjecture was bestowed on the course of conduct that might be expected from Lady Rivers's daughter under such trying circumstances. Would she set an example of romantic constancy, and marry her lover in spite of his downfall, or would she act worthily of her bringing up, and throw him over courageously, now that he had nothing to offer befitting her just claims? Opinions were much divided on the subject; some holding that Lady Rivers would never allow her favourite daughter to subside into a poor marriage, after all her ambitious hopes and schemes, and the boasting to which she had committed herself of late years. Others, whom Alma's charm had fascinated, maintained that the daughter had a will, and, it was averred, unlikely as such a supposition sounded, a heart of her own, capable of finding something lovable in a man, besides his fortune. The question served for discussion and conjecture for a longer time than such puzzles usually remain unsolved, for no authentic information was to be obtained from either of the sources who could have furnished it with authority.

Wynyard Anstice's old friends and acquaintance, when he reappeared among them, in his former character, found that his usual frankness deserted him, and that he became extremely impenetrable whenever any approach to a question respecting his present relations with Miss Rivers, was ventured upon by anyone. And when, later in the same season, Lady Rivers returned to London, in restored health, and the mother and daughter reappeared in their old circle, and resumed their long-interrupted round of gaieties, the most curious of those who had discussed Alma's fate did not venture to address any question to herself on the subject. Hers was not a beauty to fade quickly, and she was as well received and as much

admired as ever, perhaps a little more looked at and talked about, for the romantic story attached to her name, and that shadow of a nearly-acquired coronet which the imaginative among her acquaintance still saw hovering about her brow. A girl who had been within a week of becoming a countess could not fail to be regarded with a greater interest than attached to the generality of people.

Among the men of her acquaintance, there was more than one who felt a nearer interest than curiosity in the question as to whether or not her hand was free, and who would have endeavoured to put an end to the doubt, if the least opportunity for such a step had been given; but though Alma took some pains to sustain her reputation as a wit and beauty, and to hold the position of a popular favourite, which she had long enjoyed, she never distinguished any of her admirers so far as to give him courage to approach her thus nearly. She remained an enigma to most people; even those who thought they knew her well were puzzled to reconcile the energy with which she would at times throw herself into the amusement of the moment, and the keen interest in intellectual subjects her conversation always displayed, with a certain cold proud apathy, which was the prevailing expression of her countenance. Yet, as time went on, even in the superficial society she frequented, there came to be around her a little band of steadfast adherents and warm friends, who boasted that, through one circumstance or another, occurring in ordinary social intercourse, they had penetrated beyond the brilliant, cold, outside crust that was all her ordinary acquaintance knew of her, and that they had found beneath, a large-hearted sympathy, a capacity for wise counsel, an energetic helpfulness that made her a very friend of friends. Foremost among these were some specially well-mated, though not prosperous young married pairs, who were known to profess that they owed all their happiness to words of earnest sympathy and counsel, and deeds of help, given in the crisis of their lives, by the reputed worldly-wise Alma Rivers.

Wynyard's fears that his prospect of success in his profession would be materially damaged by his year of idleness, were not fulfilled. On the contrary, whether because public attention had been turned to him during his brief elevation, or because he had really gained some-

thing of added force of character and intellect by what he had gone through, his resumption of work proved to be the turning-point in his career. From a moderate, he passed to a rapid and distinguished success. Work of the kind he most liked flowed in upon him from many sources. His activity and mettle, if not his ambition, were roused to meet the claims upon him, and following in the wake of strenuous effort came the reputation and money and chances of honourable preferment that had seemed a long way ahead of him only two years ago. He told himself that these things had come just a little too late for him to take pride or pleasure in them. Yet there was truth in what Katherine Moore frequently said, when they discussed the reverses of his life together, that he would have found his change of fortune harder to bear, and been more apt to brood over all he had lost, if the life into which he had fallen had not had so many stirring interests, and been passed in such a stress of effort. He might have added the distractions of society to his other occupations, had he so pleased, for he was too popular a person to be easily forgotten, or indifferently allowed to slip out of circles to which he had once been admitted; but though his temper did not become exactly soured, he never lost his disgust for the hollowness of worldly favour which his experience had shown him.

CHAPTER XLIV.

ALL THINGS FIND REST UPON THEIR JOURNEY'S END.

If men were happy in that age of gold,
We yet may hope to see mild Saturn's reign,
For all things that were buried live again,
By Time's revealing circle forward rolled.

RAIN has fallen heavily during the night, but now the sun is shining brightly, making the green leaves almost transparent in their freshness. For it is a bright May day at Leigh, and the sunshine, high above the trees, makes the slender jets of water from the dragons' mouths look like golden threads as they fall into their basin. Emmie West sits beside the fountain playing with little fair-haired Ralph.

Five years have passed lightly over Emmie. She looks older—more thoughtful, perhaps—but her eyes are full of the old sweetness as she bends to kiss the child.

Emmie is surprised at herself—hitherto she has refused to come to Leigh during Madame de Florimel's annual visit, thereby incurring madame's indignation and some covert hints about her perversity in the letters which her kind friend occasionally sends her, for Madame de Florimel is firmly persuaded that Emmie shrinks from meeting Wynyard Anstice at Leigh, and Wynyard always chooses the period of her own visit to come and see after the interests of his little ward.

Emmie likes to come when Katherine Moore is alone there, to sit at her feet, as she says, and learn how to educate. Katherine has put her ideas into practice—she is now a real educator.

When first Wynyard installed her at Leigh as guardian of the little heir, Katherine had resigned herself to give up all her aspirations for the sake of watching over Christabel's child, and just when Wynyard had begun to fear that she would droop from the monotony of her small circle of duties, old David Macvie came to her full of an important discovery. Little by little, he had managed to find out that an educational bequest for the boys and girls of the town in which he lived had fallen into wrong hands, and that instead of establishing a foundation school the money had been filling the pockets of private individuals. The persevering old man raked out all the particulars, and then, at a loss how to make use of his information, he came to Katherine Moore. Katherine at once decided that the right must be reclaimed, and advised that they should seek legal counsel and help from Mr. Anstice. Wynyard rose high in David's esteem when the bequest so long diverted from its lawful purpose was recovered by his efforts, and a couple of houses were secured in order that the founder's wishes might be carried out.

Katherine found, in the help she gave this school, a wide scope for the longing she had so long felt to benefit her fellow-women by raising the tone of their education, not only in the matter of mere head-knowledge, but as members of the great human family. And, besides this, she devoted much of her time daily to the Leigh schools for the poor. Emmie had, by her accounts of Katherine's doings, fired the Kirkmans to interest themselves in the welfare and the teaching of their poorer neighbours,

and as years went by Katherine's presence made itself felt through the country around Leigh wherever the education question was mooted.

So far as society was concerned she remained hidden like the stone flung into some stagnant pool which rouses the sleeping water and spreads its waves in ever-increasing circles.

Sometimes Katherine summoned Wynyard Anstice down from London to hold counsel with her about fresh plans and projects either for the girls' grammar school, or for some of the more strictly charitable works at Leigh itself; but these were not, as has been said, his visits of enjoyment, he liked so much better to be at Leigh when Madame de Florimel was there, and to-day he was sitting an amused listener, while madame and Katherine Moore were discussing Ralph's future education.

Madame de Florimel was in her gayest spirits, for to-day the wish of her heart was granted. Emmie West—self-willed, obstinate little Emmie, as madame called her—had actually arrived last night, and, after such a long separation, Madame de Florimel had not been able to scold her favourite. This morning she was far too happy even to scold Wynyard for the obstinate neutrality he maintained during the animated discussion of which he had already begun to tire. The talk had drifted from facts to suppositions, and Madame de Florimel was eager in support of her own theories on education. "Come now"—she looked at Wynyard with the bright smile that seemed to carry itself into the hearts of those she spoke to—"arouse yourself, my friend, and tell Miss Moore that, if Ralph had been a girl, he must not have been sent young to school. A small world is best and safest for a young girl—is it not so, Wynyard?—though, in my opinion, it is also best for a young boy like Ralph for some years to come."

"I have not seen the young boy in question since I arrived," answered Wynyard, and rose as he spoke. "I can better give you my opinion when I have seen Ralph, madame."

He went out, and Madame de Florimel looked smilingly at Katherine.

"He will not come back to us," she said; "I knew he would come to Leigh as soon as he heard of Emmie's

visit. After all, there is not much use in our argument," she added playfully. "Wynyard is the only responsible guardian, we cannot decide on anything of consequence without him."

Katherine smiled. "And as Ralph is only five years old, dear madame, I believe we may leave him at present to Casabianca's teaching."

Meanwhile Wynyard had strolled on to the lower terrace of the flower garden, and taken a seat by Emmie West on the porphyry edge of the fountain, just out of reach of the spray from the dragons' mouths, which, much as Madame de Florimel sneered at their meagre trickle, sufficed to keep up a pleasant pattering sound, as of rain on the leaves of the water-lilies beneath.

"Well," he said, in answer to the upward glance of the brown eyes that shyly welcomed him, "I have escaped at last, you see, from the council of education; the discussion between the lady advocates of rival systems was becoming so hot that it would hardly have been reverent for male ears to listen longer; and all, you understand, on the supposition of how each educator ought to have acted if the young gentleman down there, taking his first lesson in the great art of destruction from Casabianca, had chanced to be a young lady. They never take my feelings into consideration, or reflect on the bitterness they are stirring up in my heart by indulging in such tantalising imaginings."

"No," said Emmie, smiling; "but then, you see, they are not in earnest. I amuse myself sometimes by trying to picture the dismay there would be on both faces if such a transformation as they are imagining could take place. Whatever they may have wished at one time, they are both so thoroughly fond of little Ralph now, they would grudge to have a hair of his head curled differently."

"He is a pretty little fellow."

"And what a merry laugh he has! Did you hear just now when the popgun went off, and now again, as Casa hoists him on his shoulder to carry him to the house? I never expected to see Casabianca devote himself to a child, as he does to little Ralph. It has altered him, being here so much with Katherine and Madame de Florimel."

"And turning out so unexpectedly a Grecian on our hands. He has only another term of yellow stockings

before him, he tells me, and then he goes to Cambridge. Who would have thought that sheer combativeness, untinged with any shade of love of learning whatever, would have carried him so far? What does your sister Mildie say?"

"She is immensely proud of him, of course, and flatters herself that she has had some little share in stimulating his combativeness by treading closely on his heels in all his studies, and taunting him continually with the danger of being surpassed by a woman."

"But how does she take this final victory? has she no envious longings after Girton herself?"

"What do you think of Harry having generously offered to send her there, when he got that good appointment I told you of, through Dr. Urquhart? Are we not growing ambitious as a family? Mildie hesitates to accept his help, however; she wants to begin earning, and is fairly satisfied at having passed, with first-class honours, in her favourite subjects, 'Physics and Political Economy.'"

"Physics and Political Economy! it sounds tremendous. And are you bent on bringing up the juvenile Kirkmans to like achievements? I think I heard you say yesterday that you had grown fond of teaching."

"Some things. Katherine Moore advised me to keep to a few subjects, and to let those be what I could really care for. Luckily my pupils were very small when I first went to them, and I just managed to keep ahead of them in one or two studies—French, for example—which always takes me back to La Roquette, so that somehow or other, in teaching the children to speak it, I have managed to soften their rough Kirkman voices and gestures by inoculating them with something of Madelon's pretty gracious tones and ways of speaking. History, too, I can make something of; it is after all, you know, chiefly people's lives. I can make *that* interesting, because I grow interested myself. But when it comes to pulling things to pieces to see what they are made of——" Here Emmie laid a white water-lily, which she had gathered, caressingly against her cheek if in mute protest against the possibility of her ever being called upon to botanise it. "No, I have no capacity for studies of that kind. When the little

Kirkmans are ready for them I shall have to leave them and look out for a fresh set of dunces to begin upon."

"Would *one* dunce do as well as several? Emmie, I wish you would come and teach me."

"What do you mean? How could I teach *you* anything? I know so little, and you so much."

"As if one person's way of knowing were the least in the world like another's. I should very much like to get hold of your method of looking at history, for example. People's lives, you say—but with *you* lives where all the noble thoughts and all the good deeds and the tender wise sayings come to the front, with full light of comprehension and sympathy upon them; and where the evil side, the meannesses and deceptions, the deeds of all the water-people, of royal Cousin Almas and Aunt Riverses—are contemplated through such a mist of wonder and pity that half their hideousness is lost. Emmie, will you come and teach me to look at—well, not at past but at present life histories—yours and mine—in *that* way?"

"But it is a foolish rose-coloured way, as you said."

"I did not say so; that is not what I meant. There is nothing false about it, it is *the* way—the way of victory, the way of love—the faith that conquers the world. I could not come to you with any hope for myself, if I did not know that you had that power of a pure heart to see the best, and exercise faith beyond experience: but for that knowledge, I dare not come. I have no right to ask you to listen to me again. Do you know what day of the month it is to-day, Emmie? You talked of sometimes being taken back to La Roquette, will you let me take you back?"

He paused, and looked at her anxiously for a moment, but the flush on the tender downcast face, the quivering of the dark eyelashes, gave him hope, and he went on: "Emmie, imagine yourself for a minute or two under the quince-trees on the hill, as you stood on this same spring evening, five years ago. Let me take up a topic that was interrupted then. I have a great deal more to say about it now, dear, than I had five years ago, if only I dare hope you would hear me patiently." He paused again. There was no refusal to hear, though Emmie did not this time raise her eyes, even for a second, to meet those that sought hers; but Wynyard was so little dis-

mayed by her silence that he drew nearer to her, and took the little hand in which the water-lily was trembling.

"I don't happen to have a full-grown ripe quince in my hand to offer you, which would be the shortest way of telling the story of my life during the last five years—the story of the growth of my love to you, from that first stage when I had rather a presentiment than a knowledge of what I could feel for you, to its full-grown power. Now, I cannot trust myself to talk of what it is, but, failing the ripe quince, here is something else I want you to look at, since I see you will not look at me. There—do you remember it? Madame Barbou has never had her wedding present yet. The ring we were to have given her together has lain in a recess of my pocket-book ever since. I have never been able to bring myself to part with it, though I can tell you that, for the first year or two of its being in my possession, the sight of it gave me nothing but pain and self-disgust, and a bitter bitter feeling of what I had lost. I don't know how long it is since I began to ask myself if I might let a little ray of hope colour these memories. Four years—you see it has taken four years to give me courage to speak of it to you. Dearest, was that a tear falling upon the ring? You have forgiven me, then—you mean me to hope? Surely it is a token that the bitter memories are washed away, and that I may put it upon your finger now; and, oh! with how much stronger and better love than I had to offer you on that other day when I showed it to you under the magnolias. Only put your hand in mine, dear, and I shall feel that a far higher happiness, greater than I ever conceived, is given back to me."

It was easier for Emmie to move her hand towards the ring than to speak or to raise her eyes, for these were too full of tears at the moment; but by-and-by, when the ring circled her finger and her head was resting on Wynyard's shoulder, she whispered: "If you were speaking of my love when you said 'given back,' you must not think so, or speak so again, for you have had it all the time—only the five years' waiting has made it perhaps a little better worth having. I do not wish for the May evening under the magnolias back again. This is so much, much better."

THE END.

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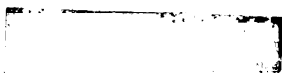
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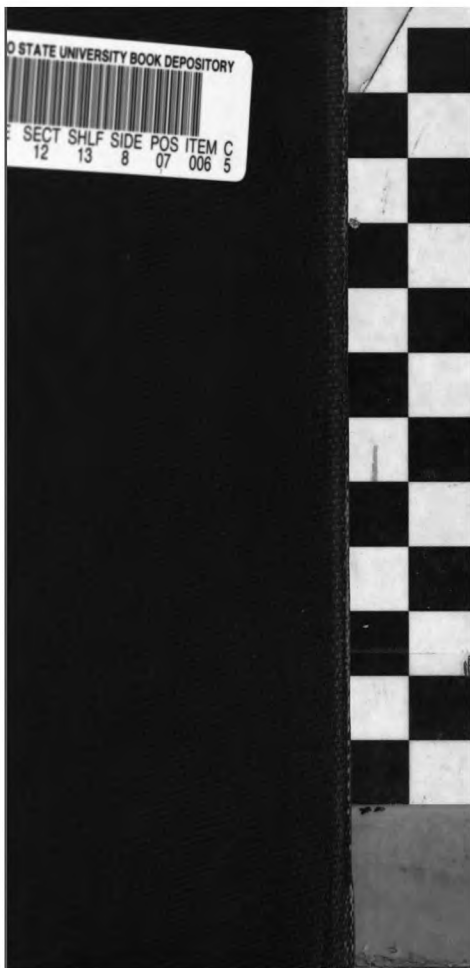
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